

Visage

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Relationships:	Ranboo & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo & Technoblade , Technoblade & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo & Technoblade & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)
Characters:	Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Karl Jacobs , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , (mentioned) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , (mention) - Character , FoolishG (Video Blogging RPF) , Noah Brown , Alexis Quackity
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Visage

by [third_crow](#)

Summary

“It’s just a boy,” Phil said quietly. Techno looked the child over again. Now that it was quiet, it seemed so gentle. Peaceful. “The storm is coming in fast. He’ll die out here if we leave him.”

“It’s a risk,” Techno muttered, fixing his grip on the axe.

“I thought the same about you,” Phil said, looking back at Techno. They locked eyes. Techno looked away first.

Or, piglin-hybrid Techno and phantom-hybrid Phil find a kid lost in the woods (who may or may not be hearing voices) and take him home for safe keeping.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Perhaps he considered himself an adventurer, a scavenger, a worker. Perhaps he was curious, or perhaps he was driven. Perhaps he had a name, or a family, or a purpose – but in the end, in his final moments, the only choice that truly mattered was this one, in which chaos was reintroduced to the world.

He had sealed his fate the moment he touched the Eye. The cracked, fiery emerald had called out, its voice as smooth as the sea, promising power, knowledge, glory. It spoke with the voice of a god. It wasn't his fault he fell for it. It could have been anyone. So he reached for it, held it in his hands, let the icy gaze of the ancient eye wash over him.

This was his first mistake.

The second was his uselessness.

The voice of the Dreamon is persuasive. It promises, and it lies, and it tricks, and in its wake the rules of gods and men fall away into void until all that is left is tortured souls. But now, banished between worlds, its only task is to find its way back.

It wasn't this man's fault he couldn't serve this purpose. Still, the more he knew, the more risk there was to limit the Dreamon's reach.

At least he was obedient.

When told to jump, he did.

Now all the Dreamon needed was a new mind to influence, a mind that could work to free it from the Void it inhabited. A link between worlds.

This was the start of a new undoing.

Chapter End Notes

GENERAL WARNINGS FOR ENTIRE FIC: derealization, depictions of violence
(graphic violence will be warned at start of chapters)

Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

The wail emanating from its open mouth struck dread into Technoblade's heart. The sound wasn't natural. It was as if it was moving directly from the creature's mind into his, with no sound lost between them.

This was something that needed to die.

Something that begged to die.

He drew his axe.

"We'll need to replace this one soon," Technoblade called over his shoulder.

"Why's that?"

In lieu of a response, he turned to Phil and stuck his hand through the tear in the tarp. The coarse canvas had lasted a long while, but now it frayed at the edges and was worn thin by the many storms it had protected against.

"Ah," Philza nodded. "Nothing that can't be sewn up." Techno looked down at the fabric, wondering if they were looking at the same tarp. Philza took a corner and walked it over to the edge of the beet patch, pinning it down to cover the green leaves.

A storm was rolling in. Over the trees, the sky was dark, swelling with clouds and obscuring the far forests with snow. Techno sighed, pinning down his side of the tarp as well. Storms weren't an issue so much as an inconvenience. It meant more work, ushering all of the animals back into their barns, covering crops so they wouldn't freeze and die, fixing any damaged structures after the storm passed. Preparing for these blizzards was simply part of the deal living in the tundra, but it was a welcome trade off for the benefit of living completely unbothered.

Though, storms had an added discomfort for Technoblade particularly. For safety and ease, he and Phil stayed together during storms rather than in their own respective cabins, and since Phil's had the majority of emergency supplies, that means Techno had to give up the comfort of his own space and privacy.

Not that he didn't like Phil. It was quite the opposite, actually. Philza was one of the few people in this world that he could bear to be around. But that didn't mean he didn't value his time alone. Maybe this one would be short.

"I've got the potatoes. You go see that the cows have enough water," Philza said. Techno nodded, trudging off to check on the barns that lay on the edge of the forest. As he drew closer, he noticed a low howl. Sometimes when the wind whipped through the trees, it made a sound like a wolf's cry... but there was no wind now. He turned to face the forest, the sound humming dully in the back of his skull. It was almost like it was vibrating inside of him like sound trapped in a bell.

He shook his head, stepping into the barn where the sound quieted. The cows nudged at his hands as he checked their water troughs, huffing as he pushed them aside to throw hay down to insulate the floor. They were cramped, but they'd be fine.

When he stepped outside, the sound was still there.

It made his ears twitch, building a strange feeling of discomfort under his skin. He faced the woods. Something was out there, something he felt uneasy about. One hand on his axe, he began to walk through the trees.

Despite his bulky stature, he moved silently through the snow, a natural hunter, well versed in these parts by now. With each step he took, the howl grew slowly louder. It was low and gravely, and Techno would have easily written it off as the sound of wind if the air hadn't been so still. As he walked, though, it became layered, as if a second cry was being added to the chorus. This one was higher, sharper, more... human.

Technoblade wasn't one to startle easily. He had nerves of steel, even in the most difficult of challenges. But despite that, despite his strength and self assuredness, this sound made his hair stand on end. It felt like a warning. More than that. It felt like a broadcast of pain. Of agony.

There was a creature standing in the snow. It was like nothing Techno had ever seen before, and that was saying something.

It was tall, boney, one half dark as night and the other blinding white like the snow. It held its head in its hands, clawed fingers digging deep into its temples and drawing forth trails of shimmering purple blood. It had a tail, whipping furiously behind it, the feathered tip making whistling sounds as it flew through the air, or rustling as it wrapped and unwrapped itself from the thing's body.

The wail emanating from its open mouth struck dread into Technoblade's heart. The sound wasn't natural. It was as if it was moving directly from the creature's mind into his, with no sound lost between them.

This was something that needed to die.

Something that begged to die.

He drew his axe.

An arm across his chest blocked his path. He hadn't heard Phil approach over the wailing of the creature, but it was clear by the look on his face that where Technoblade felt dread at the creature's howl, Philza felt sympathy towards it.

In the end, he supposed, that had always been the difference between the two of them.

Philza stepped forward, and Techno put a hand on his arm, a silent reminder to be cautious. Philza ruffled his wings, acknowledging this as he moved through the snow. Even though Techno had stopped moving towards the thing, the wail grew louder, piercing almost painfully through the air. He heard Phil call out, his voice nearly overpowered by the howl, but his call got no reaction from the creature.

As Techno looked closer at the thing, though, he began to realize why Philza had stopped him from killing it immediately. The creature wasn't merely a mindedness mob like those that he had hunted before. It was dressed in tattered clothes, dirty and drenched. Its bare feet were bloodied, leaving purple tracks in the snow leading off a ways behind it before it had stopped here to scream, but its hands and feet were human despite the sharp claws. It had messy hair, a sharp jaw, a face that was familiar.

A hybrid. Just like Techno. Just like Phil.

And Techno had almost murdered it where it stood.

He pushed aside the pang of guilt as Philza called out to the creature again, stepping closer. The wind in the forest began to pick up. Techno glanced at the sky, noting the clouds beginning to move in. They needed to get inside before the storm started. It was easy to get lost out here, easy to be buried. Philza reached out a hand, but thought better of it, pulling back. Instead, he reached out the tip of one wing, cautiously bringing it around until it brushed up against the creature's shoulder.

The cry stopped abruptly, leaving a ringing silence in its wake.

"Hello?" Philza said softly, leaning forward ever so slightly. The creature moved its hands slowly. Purple blood coated its fingers, dripping down its temples. It lifted its head.

It was a child.

The harshness of its boney frame was in direct opposition to the creature's soft face, eyes wide and large, set above high cheekbones. It kept its gaze low, letting its arms fall to its sides. Its tail stilled its rapid thrashing, falling limply against the snow. The wind whipped through the trees once again, billowing Techno's cape up around him and ruffling through Philza's wings. The silence left in the absence of the cry was almost more unsettling than the cry itself.

"Hello?" Philza tried again. "Are you alright?" The creature flicked its gaze up from where it had fixated on the ground, and Techno watched as Philza stiffened instantly. They were

locked in each other's gaze. Its eyes, one green, the other a crimson red, trembled, glowing as light bounced off of them from the surrounding snow. A new sound began echoing from the creature's chest, not quite a cry, but a groan, building slowly.

"Phil?" Techno called. He gripped his axe tighter. Philza didn't move. The thing didn't either. "*Phil*," he said again, stepping towards the man. The groan became louder, a new warning, encouraging that same dread as before. Techno needed to act now.

With his axe held out in front of him, just in case, he grabbed onto Philza's arm and pulled him back, ready to strike as he did.

But he didn't have to.

As soon as the focus was broken between the two, there was silence once again. This time, though, the creature's eyes flickered dimly just before it crumpled into a heap in the snow.

The two of them just stared at it for a moment.

Philza drew his wings in close to his back, shaking them out to release the tension that had built since this interaction started. He began to step towards the thing once more, but Techno held his grip on the man's arm.

"You're really thinking of going near that thing again?" Techno demanded.

"It's a child, Techno," Phil said, turning to face him. "A hybrid child."

"So? It could've killed you—"

"You don't know that," Phil shook his head, pulling his arm free from Techno.

“You don’t either.” They both stared at the creature. It breathed slowly in the snow, eyes closed. Despite its wounds almost as if it could have been sleeping. Philza knelt down in front of it, turning it onto its back.

“It’s just a boy,” Phil said quietly. Techno looked the child over again. Now that it was quiet, it seemed so gentle. Peaceful. “The storm is coming in fast. He’ll die out here if we leave him.”

“It’s a risk,” Techno muttered, fixing his grip on the axe.

“I thought the same about you,” Phil said, looking back at Techno. They locked eyes. Techno looked away first.

“Don’t do that,” he said softly.

“It’s true. It’s similar, don’t you think?” Philza looked back at the boy. “This is around the same place, too—”

“Stop, just...” Techno sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Bring him back. We need to go now, though. The storm’s blowing in.”

Philza hid a smile. He propped the boy up in the snow, wrapping each arm around his shoulders until he was leaned against Phil’s back, his legs dragging in the snow behind him. Techno looked at the two of them skeptically.

“I won’t hesitate to kill it if it’s a threat, Philza.” His expression was stoney. He meant it.

“I know,” Philza said, equally as cold. “Let’s get home.”

Awakening

Chapter Summary

After a long pause, the boy reluctantly pulled his gaze from Philza and glanced around the space. Techno could see him trying to process his surroundings, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. He knew that feeling.

Eventually, his eyes came to settle on the front door on the other side of the room, next to the kitchen. He slowly began coiling like a spring, tension building as he stared longingly at this chance to escape.

“I wouldn’t,” Philza said quietly. The boy’s gaze didn’t shift. “There’s a storm outside. You’ll be buried in an hour, if you don’t freeze first.” He held his focus, but swallowed hard. Philza had put it far more gently than Techno would have. To put it bluntly, he was trapped here. To leave would mean death. “You’ll be safe here.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Knowing Phil as long as he had, the man didn’t often surprise Techno, but there were rare exceptions where the indifference and skepticism he had come to embody fell away and Techno was reminded that Philza’s heart was far more gentle than his own. He had a crinkle between his brows, focused and precise as he slowly wound bandages around the burns that speckled the boy’s arms. Every so often, his wings would adjust, feathers ruffling slightly, or he would lean forward to inspect the child’s strange appearance. Yet throughout all of this, his face was gentle, concerned. His hands moved carefully and methodically, a learned skill to his movements that was, Techno would admit, a bit mesmerising. He hadn’t seen Philza look so tender in a long time.

“I can’t figure it out,” Philza said, leaning back from where he sat next to the boy. He placed the remaining bandages on the side table next to him, the soft cotton unrolling slightly, and leaned his head back to glance at Techno. Techno raised an eyebrow. “His hybrid. I can’t figure it out.”

Techno gave the boy another once over. In his head, he’d been noting each new piece of information he gathered. He wouldn’t admit it, but he was unbearably curious as well. The boy was laid on the couch in the lower level of Phil’s cabin, but he hardly fit, his feet hanging over the far end. He was tall, lanky, far more thin than he probably should have been. His fingers were long and thin, with sharp nails, but they were recognizably human. His skin was

soft, somewhere between scaly and leathery, flecked with patches of purple on his darker side and light pinks and blues on his lighter side, and in certain lights these flecks seemed almost iridescent. The split in his skin colors was baffling in and of itself.

Among the flecks of color, he was also speckled with burns, some small, slightly paler or darker in color, reminding Techno of the little burns he got when hot oil splashed from the pans while he was cooking. But some were harsh, deep red burns, gathered around the collar of his shirt and his torso. This had confused him and Phil both when they'd begun dressing his wounds, but they quickly found the cause.

Phil had tried to clean the blood from his temple with a wet rag, but the moment the water touched his skin, it began to burn immediately, becoming raised and irritated. Where the water dripped down to his neck, it left a trail of red skin in its wake. Philza was nothing if not an improviser, and he quickly found a solution mixing netherwart with magma cream to make a paste and wiping the boy's wounds with a bit of oil instead of water just to get rid of the purple blood streaks.

The child slept through all of this, hardly stirring for even a moment. Rarely, in his sleep, he made a low noise in his throat like a chirp, but that was the extent of it. His face looked so different while he slept from the unease he had expressed when he stood in the forest. Then, Techno couldn't focus on much more than the sound he made and the piercing color of his eyes. He had seemed sharp with fear then. But sleep made everyone seem peaceful, and he was no exception. He had gentle features despite the hardness of his jaw and high cheekbones, cheeks soft, long eyelashes, freckles of color bridging his nose. His hair was messy, split in color just like his skin, long enough to cover his forehead. His ears hung down like a lamb's, further contributing to the softness he now projected.

Techno's list cycled on repeat in his head, slowly accumulating more information which served to get him no closer to any answer; *scaled skin, half black, half white, burnt by water, one red eye, one green, long tail, lamb ears, claws, tall, inhuman howl...* none of this got him anywhere. He was clearly a hybrid, but of what, Techno had no idea. He'd never encountered a creature like this. Hybrids were usually fairly easy to identify, despite their rarity. Their features almost always gave them away. Techno didn't have to do much soul searching to realize he was a Piglin hybrid. Philza's wings gave him away as a Phantom hybrid from a mile away. He'd seen a Creeper hybrid with speckled green skin and dark eyes, a Blaze hybrid with fiery orange hair. He'd even seen a photo once in an old book of a Zombie hybrid, which was a thoroughly unsettling creature. Despite all that, this boy was a mystery.

“I though maybe Ghast at first, from the white... I don’t even know if that’s possible...” Phil wondered aloud. “But that feels like a stretch. The tail... and the ears?”

“Wither?” Techno posited. “Could explain the black skin. And how boney he is.”

“I think he’s just malnourished, mate.” Techno huffed.

“Even then, it still just doesn’t seem right.”

“Eh... cat?” Philza looked back at him, then to the kid, then back at him.

“Eh.”

“It’s usually not this much of a mystery,” Techno sighed. “I don’t like riddles—” Technoblade was interrupted by a chirp that cut through his thoughts, like a bell in his head. Philza had clearly heard it too by the way he jumped at the sound. They both turned to see the boy with his eyes now wide and dazed. He began to sit upright, that same low moan building in his throat. The sound was odd now what Techno watched him make it. He didn’t open his mouth. It was as if it was coming from his chest, broadcasted rather than spoken. Philza stood and carefully backed away. They hadn’t yet seen the child act aggressively towards them, but the threat of violence was better taken seriously than dismissed if one valued his own life these days.

As Philza backed off, the noise died back down, but the child’s eyes remained wide. He sat up slowly, tearing his eyes away from Techno and Phil for only a split second at a time to dart around and take in his surroundings. The two of them both took care not to make direct eye contact. Philza had told Techno afterwards how he felt frozen in place, not physically, but sheerly out of being startled by how piercing his gaze was. Not only that, but it clearly made the child afraid, or potentially aggravated. In either case, neither of them intended to find out the consequence of this boy getting to the peak of his building howls.

“Hey, mate—” Philza started, but cut himself short when the boy snapped his head toward him with such speed that it almost made Techno jump, too. Philza held his palms up toward him, attempting to diffuse the tension. “You’re alright,” he said softly. “See?” He gestured gently

to the space they were in. In Philza's defence, the cabin was the furthest thing from intimidating. The couch was covered in soft pillows and woven blankets, each wall thoroughly decked out in framed items and hanging artifacts he'd found in his many years of traveling and exploring, a warm fireplace crackling in the corner at almost all times. It was warm, comfortable. Techno enjoyed spending time here, and considering how much he valued his own space, that was an impressive testament to Philza's ability to make a house feel like home.

After a long pause, the boy reluctantly pulled his gaze from Philza and glanced around the space. Techno could see him trying to process his surroundings, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. He knew that feeling.

Eventually, his eyes came to settle on the front door on the other side of the room, next to the kitchen. He slowly began coiling like a spring, tension building as he stared longingly at this chance to escape.

"I wouldn't," Philza said quietly. The boy's gaze didn't shift. "There's a storm outside. You'll be buried in an hour, if you don't freeze first." He held his focus, but swallowed hard. Philza had put it far more gently than Techno would have. To put it bluntly, he was trapped here. To leave would mean death. "You'll be safe here."

The tension slowly left the child's body. His shoulders sagged, gaze becoming less sharp, more unsteady. Defeated. He let his eyes fall from the door, glancing half heartedly around the room until he found a new fixation on his hands where they rested in his lap, fingers twitching slightly. No longer focused rigidly, his eyes began to shake side to side, trembling in an odd way Techno had never seen before. He wondered how it was possible to see clearly that way, but of course, he said nothing.

"Do you have a name? Something we can call you by?" Philza's question was met by silence. He glanced back at Techno, who gave a shrug. Talking wasn't exactly his strong suit. "Are you hungry?" Nothing. "I've got stew on the stove, it'll be ready soon..." Not even a chirp.

It seemed like all the fight had been taken out of the boy as soon as escape had been cut from the equation. All that was left was a shell. Techno wondered what he was thinking about, if his thoughts were racing, jumbled, scattered? Or was his mind as blank as his expression?

“I’ll bring some over. You can have it if you’d like, up to you,” Phil said gently, backing off slowly before turning to walk back toward the kitchen. Techno retreated as well, suddenly uncertain of how to behave when left as the closest presence to the kid. He walked to the front entrance, pulling some logs from the stack of firewood there and trudging back over to stoke the fire. He had expected some reaction as he came closer, even a glance in his direction, but the boy made no acknowledgement that he was even there. He placed a log on the flames and nudged it with the poker, sending a few smouldering embers into the air. In the kitchen, there were the soft thuds of wooden utensils and bowls being set on the counter, a soft bubbling emerging as the stew came to a boil. Outside, the wind howled.

Philza and Technoblade often operated in silence around each other. Both were often enveloped in their own tasks, Phil often crafting something or organizing his stocks, Techno reading or sharpening some tool. They didn’t feel the need to fill the space between them with meaningless small talk, and besides, there wasn’t much for one to say that the other didn’t already know. But now, that silence felt so strange, hanging in the air like it was a brand new sound in and of itself, punctuated by another presence. It felt different, silence occupied by silence where there should simply be nothing. Techno didn’t know how to put it into words that made sense.

When dinner was finished cooking, Phil brought over a bowl to place on the side table next to the spot where the boy sat. He had pulled his long legs up, hugging them loosely to his chest with his chin resting on his knees. He stared out the window into the storm, a wall of white snow whipping past the window fast enough that it was almost like looking at a still image. When Phil set the bowl down, it elicited no reaction. The boy didn’t move to reach for it, nor did he even note it had been put there at all.

There it remained for the rest of the night, until Phil took it back to pour into the pot and store so it didn’t go bad. He’d try again the next day, setting out roasted pork and vegetables from breakfast or bread and cheese, the next day a mug of milk or some fruit, the day after a roasted potato or even his beloved pumpkin pastries. None of it was touched. The boy sat in place, staring out the window, motionless like a statue. When he slept, he slept in the same spot, in the same position, eyes half lidded like he was always at least partially looking out for something even in rest.

Only in his sleep did he make a sound, that same soft chirp that crept from his throat and snuck into sound when no one was watching. It filled the dark silence of night, louder in their heads than the roar of the wind outside, but still so quiet they could hardly tell it had happened at all.

Chapter End Notes

I'll note it once here just in case; this is a work of fiction, written exclusively about the characters portrayed in the fictional universe of the Dream SMP and NOT about the content creators themselves! Thanks!

Forget Me Not

Chapter Summary

“I don’t remember,” he said again. Philza looked confused.

“What about before? It’s just... nothing?”

“Not... not nothing...” Ranboo said. Concern was broadcasted clearly on his face. But even though he was clearly shocked by this amnesia, it felt natural to Ranboo. It didn’t seem new, not to remember. Forgetting was familiar. He understood the world. He knew what it was to live here, what it was to walk and talk, to cook food, to light a fire. Life felt familiar, but he just didn’t have a place to anchor himself in it. There was nothing to ground him. “I don’t know how to explain it.” It was like floating.

There were times when he couldn’t tell if the snow was so high it was covering the window, or if it was simply whipping past so fast in the wind that the world outside appeared to be a sheet of white. It was mesmerising to watch. Every so often, glimpses of the sky or the landscape beyond the storm would peak through the blizzard. He would see streaks of the trees, or of the barns that laid at the edge of the lake. He would squint past the snow to try to catch sight of the world outside, trying idly to piece together what this landscape looked like.

Ever since he woke up, time seemed to pass strangely. Sometimes, his thoughts would race, desperately searching for some connection between events, some timeline to put his memories into, some clue as to where he was or what he was doing here. He would remember the snow, the forest, the man with the wings and the man with pink skin. The voice.

The voice?

The memory only lingered for a moment, and then it was gone, lost in a spiral of thoughts that wound and wound and flooded through his thoughts like rain. Like a snow storm. It felt like an infinite loop, like he had spent days sitting here thinking in still silence.

And then he would blink and realize that no one had moved, that he hadn’t taken his next breath yet, that the fire was still licking away at the same log. That no time had passed at all.

He hated this. But what he hated more were the opposite moments, in which it took hours to complete one single thought, where day and night would come and go and his mind was still processing one single idea, one word, one feeling.

Every so often, he was vaguely aware of someone speaking. Whether or not it was directed at him, he didn't know, but the voices were low and soft. They weren't disorienting like his thoughts were. He knew one of them came and spoke to him, set down food for him. It had gentle hands that guided soft gauze around his arms, and when it came, his skin didn't burn like fire.

Slowly, things began to balance themselves out. He didn't know how much time had passed. He began to move, and it felt as though he was a statue awakening from sleep, stiff and unnatural, and when he began to finally feel grounded again, the feeling was addictive. He felt like been buried, clawing his way out to emerge for air.

Waking up felt cold.

When he breathed, it caught in his throat, and suddenly the world felt real again. It had color. It had movement. Where the fire flicked to his right, he felt warmth. Cold air drifted off from the window, slivers of wind seeping through the cracks. There was a sting at his left shoulder, and he flinched from it, turning to find himself face to face with someone familiar.

The man froze, staring back at him, a strange silence drawing on between them, before he drew his hand back from where it rested on his shoulder.

"Did that hurt?" the man asked gently. "Sorry," he said. In his hand, he held a handful of gauzy fabric, glistening with an orangey red sheen, and he lowered it slowly, folding the cloth over in his hand. "It's helping the burns," he explained. The man was waiting for something, but he couldn't tell what.

He remembered this person. He had soft eyes.

“I need to finish,” the man said, holding the gauze up slightly. “If that’s alright?” He couldn’t make himself move again. His neck felt stiff and heavy, and his eyes dropped without him intending them to. He hated feeling so disoriented. The man brought his hand up slowly, as if not to startle him. The stinging in his neck was subsiding, thankfully. The man finished, loosely wrapping some of the fabric around the base of his neck and tucking it under his shirt collar. He leaned back where he sat on the small wooden table beside him and sighed, wiping his hands on his pants.

“Thank you,” he said.

The words left his mouth without him even realizing he had spoken. Without intending to speak. The man looked up, and they both sat in silence for a moment, equally startled that he had spoken. He felt fear building in his chest, but he had no idea why. Anticipation, maybe. What came next? What now?

After a long pause where the man seemed to be debating how to respond, he finally spoke.

“Of course.” He wiped one hand on his leg again. “Are you hungry? You haven’t eaten in a while.” Perhaps that was the discomfort he had been feeling in his stomach. A constant nausea had been with him since he began regaining control of himself, and now it made sense. He nodded. The man smiled kindly and stood, walking across the room to the kitchen.

“Do you, ah. Do you have a name?” He vaguely remembered being asked this before, unable to answer, unable to form words. He wondered if he could summon forth his voice this time. He looked over to the man, expecting him to be staring, awaiting his answer, but he simply walked around the kitchen, picking up a bowl, a ladle, a spoon. His wings were folded neatly, black feathers catching the light from the lamps and the fire. By the kitchen, there was a door. He didn’t know why, but it felt important to note.

He swallowed, and spoke.

“Ranboo,” he said. His voice was quiet, and his throat was scratchy, but even so, the man turned to glance at him and smiled again.

“Ranboo?” He nodded. “I like that name,” he said. “Warm stew or cold? It’ll take a minute to heat.”

“Cold,” Ranboo answered.

The sooner he ate, the sooner this feeling would leave him. The man nodded, ladling stew into the wooden bowl and making his way back over to where Ranboo sat. He passed the bowl over, and Ranboo reached out to take it. As he did, he couldn’t help but realize how much longer his own fingers were than the man. Not only that, his hands were speckled with little spots of red, almost-healed burns.

“Thank you,” he said, beginning to spoon the stew into his dry mouth. It was savory, creamy with mushrooms and carrots. Even cold, it was delicious.

“Sure.” After a few moments of Ranboo quickly scooping the food into his mouth, the man spoke again. “I’m Philza,” he said. “Or Phil, if you’d like.” The name felt familiar. The polite thing would have been to respond, to say *nice to meet you. Thank you for helping me.* But with each spoonful of stew he had, he realized more and more how hungry he was.

His stomach would ache more despite being filled, each bite simultaneously satiating that hunger and encouraging it further. He couldn’t get enough. He brought the bowl to his lips and tipped it up, gulping down the salty liquid without bothering to chew the chunks of mushrooms and vegetables that passed his lips.

When he got to the bottom of the bowl, he let his hands drop back down and breathed out, wiping the corner of his mouth with one thumb. He looked up to find Philza watching him.

“I thought you’d be hungry,” he said. He held out his hand, and Ranboo passed back the bowl. “You haven’t eaten for a few days.”

“Days?” Philza nodded as he poured more stew into the bowl, filling it higher this time. He took a large mug from the shelf above him and filled it with water from a pitcher sitting by the window, as well as a half-loaf of bread, and brought it all back.

“Thank you,” Ranboo said again.

“Don’t eat too fast, it’ll only make you feel worse,” Philza warned. Ranboo nodded. With the pangs of hunger subsiding, he ate slower, quenching his thirst and dunking the bread into the stew to slow himself down a bit. Philza watched him eat for a few minutes before speaking again.

“I’ll come right out and ask it, mate. What happened?” Ranboo looked up from his food, looking to Philza’s face, but not quite meeting his gaze. “You were in quite a state. And there’s nothing around here for miles...” He blinked, swallowing, before shaking his head slightly.

“I don’t, um,” he started, but didn’t know where to go from there. He told the truth. “I don’t remember.”

“Nothing at all? Where did you come from? Where’s your family?”

“I don’t remember,” he said again. Philza looked confused.

“What about before? It’s just... nothing?”

“Not... not nothing...” Ranboo said. Concern was broadcasted clearly on his face. But even though he was clearly shocked by this amnesia, it felt natural to Ranboo. It didn’t seem new, not to remember. Forgetting was familiar. He understood the world. He knew what it was to live here, what it was to walk and talk, to cook food, to light a fire. Life felt familiar, but he just didn’t have a place to anchor himself in it. There was nothing to ground him. “I don’t know how to explain it.” It was like floating.

“You don’t... okay...” Ranboo had another spoonful of soup. “You don’t seem concerned by that.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess— I dunno. It feels normal.”

“Normal?” He nodded. “That makes things a bit more difficult.”

“Yeah,” he said again. He was right. There was an ever looming question of *what comes next* hanging over their heads like a rain cloud. How could he get home if he didn’t remember where he came from? At least for now it seemed a question that could be delayed. With the storm still howling outside, he wasn’t going anywhere any time soon. That thought was half comforting, half concerning.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” He considered this question, furrowing his brow.

“Before this? Um...” What did he remember? “Snow, trees... somewhere cold, I think, maybe a cave? And then I was moving... my feet hurt. I remember my feet hurt. I think—” His stomach lurched as a memory of fear came flooding back to him. He had been running. Running somewhere... no. He remembered fear, desperation, his feet burning. Running from *something* . He didn’t remember what .

A dull panic began to rise in his throat. He took a gulp of water to force it back down, hoping maybe Philza hadn’t noticed, but a new tremor in his hand gave it away.

“You think what?” Every time Philza spoke, his voice was so much more gentle than Ranboo was expecting. Even so, he felt for some reason that this was something he couldn’t say. Something he shouldn’t say, like a secret someone else had given him to protect. But there was no one else here. Unintentionally, Ranboo’s gaze was drawn back to the door by the kitchen, watching for something. Waiting.

“Something must have brought you here,” Philza said. “No one just walks off into the tundra. Not without a death wish.” Ranboo looked back to him. He was trying to help. Ranboo knew he was just trying to help. So why did telling him this one detail feel like pulling teeth? He unclenched his jaw, loosened his grip on the mug.

“I was running,” he admitted. When he said it, it felt like the world was lifted off of him. Why did everything feel so *heavy*. Philza’s reaction was neutral, calm. Ranboo was grateful

for that.

“From what?” Ranboo looked down to his food again.

“I don’t remember,” he said again. He dunked his bread back into the stew and took another bite. Philza didn’t ask any more questions. “How—” he didn’t know how to phrase what he wanted to ask. “What did um... how did you find me?”

“Well, Techno found you actually,” Philza said.

“Techno?”

“Oh, right...” Philza looked up to the second floor, drawing Ranboo’s gaze up too. Above the living room was a second story to the cabin, a small landing with a railing and two doors. “He’s either sleeping or reading. You’ll meet him eventually. He’s a bit of a shut in, honestly.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said softly.

“You were standing in the woods making this sound. Like a howl. But that was... I mean, that was it.”

“I was just standing there?”

“I mean, you were freaking out a bit. But yeah. Just standing in the snow, uh. Screaming.”

“Oh.” He took another bite of bread. This felt like a riddle he’d never be able to solve, a puzzle with half of the pieces. Maybe his dejection and frustration was showing on his face, because Philza stood, taking the now empty bowl from Ranboo’s hands and patting him lightly on the shoulder.

“We’ll figure this out,” he said. “Don’t worry. At least you’ve got a name.” Ranboo shied away from the touch, uncertain, but the words were comforting nonetheless. As Philza washed the bowl out in the kitchen sink, Ranboo tucked one leg underneath him, pulling his other up to his chest, and rested his chin against his knee. He looked down at the mug in his hand, swirling the water around. The question repeated in his head, looping endlessly; *what comes next?*

One floor up, Technoblade sat on the ground of Philza’s second bedroom, he back against the door, listening. Something was off about this. He didn’t know what... but something.

Origins

Chapter Summary

“That actually brings me to my next question,” Phil said. “Any chance you’ve remembered anything about where you came from? Your home, family...?” Ranboo pulled his ears back further. A look of near shame crossed his face, and he shifted, glancing down at the cup of tea in his hands. Philza already knew the answer. “That’s alright,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo said solemnly.

Phil shrugged, trying to remain lighthearted. “Not your fault,” he said. He meant it. It was just poor luck and bad timing that Ranboo would be stuck here with them for the storm, time that they could have spent trying to find his family or getting him back home safe and sound. Phil couldn’t help but feel bad not just for him, but for whoever must be missing him while he was trapped here with him and Techno.

“I’m trying,” he said. “Things just keep... slipping. I can’t get my head straight.” He looked frustrated. Philza could understand why.

“Here,” Philza said, startling Ranboo out of his trance as he stared out the window at the passing snow. The storm was slowing down, but drifts were still piling up at the walls of the cabin. Ranboo turned his attention to the man, who was holding out a leather bound book in his hand, a pencil tucked under his thumb where it rested on the cover. When Ranboo didn’t take it right away, Phil nodded toward him, urging him on until he reached out to take it.

Phil still hadn’t quite gotten used to the boy’s almost-human features. He took the book in his left hand, the one on the dark purple and black side of his body, and despite how intimidating the sharp nails on his fingers looked, he was always so shockingly delicate with all of his movements. This was no exception. He held the book gingerly, like it would shatter at a moment’s notice, and opened it to find that it was blank.

“It’s to write things down. Things you remember, or things you want to remember.” Ranboo nodded slightly and looked back down at the pages, leafing through them despite them being blank. “You had said you felt like you were forgetting things, so...” Ranboo looked back up at him, confusion in his eyes, and Phil already knew what he was going to say.

“I did?” He couldn’t help but smile sympathetically.

“Yeah, mate.” Ranboo nodded solemnly.

“Thank you,” he said softly. Phil stopped himself from patting the boy on the shoulder, remembering the flinch that movement had elicited last time, and instead just gave him a nod.

“No problem.” He walked over to the kitchen, pulling his kettle from the stove as it was beginning to boil. “Either of you want tea?” He asked. He poured the water into the mug beside the stove before looking over to Techno for his response. He had long since learned that when Techno was invested in his books, there was nothing that could pry him from the page. He gave Phil a shake of his head so subtle it could hardly be noticed. “Ranboo?”

“Hm?” Philza looked over to the boy to find that he had already started writing in the book. He couldn’t see what was written from the kitchen, but it seemed he had already filled at least one full page with the dark charcoal. Philza held up the kettle by way of explanation. “Oh. Sure,” he said, his eyes softening.

Philza had yet to see Ranboo smile, he realized. The boy’s eyes were so expressive, it was almost unnecessary, filled so wholly with each emotion he felt. Unfortunately, that emotion had thus far been mostly confusion. Phil hoped that would change soon. He was still trying to understand exactly what had happened to the boy that placed him in the woods that day the storm had started, what had caused him to cry out the way he did, and to go a step further, what that cry was in the first place.

Techno had been reading through histories of the Overworld, the Nether, the God war, mythologies of creatures only recorded in fairy tales and folklore, field notebooks of drawings and notes from hunters and explorers, anything that could hint at what exactly Ranboo was a hybrid of. If Techno had found anything so far, he hadn’t revealed it yet.

When Philza had asked if Ranboo himself knew what his hybrid origins were, he was met with that same unfiltered confusion in the boy’s eyes before he asked, “what’s a hybrid?” In response, Philza had to deliver a somewhat botched lesson in biology, but his initial question had been answered nonetheless; Ranboo didn’t know his own origins either.

Technoblade had always loved mysteries. This had remained true since the moment he and Phil met. He wasn't one for knowledge per se as Philza was, reading for the sake of learning, for the sake of practical skills and information. Instead, he read stories, puzzling through myths and journals and fragments of history to piece together the long forgotten past of this world. Philza had a suspicion that he secretly enjoyed these storms, when every waking moment could be spent reading pages upon pages. Now, in this storm, he had a new mystery to solve.

It wouldn't be entirely accurate to say that Ranboo and Technoblade had become acquainted yet. In fact, it could hardly be said that they had even met. Upon even the slightest sign of Ranboo's first waking, he had retreated to his room, avoiding the entire ordeal entirely. Phil had assumed this would be the case. Techno wasn't one for strangers, and he certainly wasn't one to be friendly. It was probably for the better that he had kept his distance. From the way he carried himself to the way he spoke to the resting look of disdain he tended to carry in his face, Technoblade wasn't quite a comforting sight to see to those who didn't know him.

Even now though, some odd days after Ranboo had woken, *truly* woken, the two had yet to actually interact. Phil was honestly impressed by the man's dedication to fully ignoring the new guest in their home. He acted as though Ranboo was a ghost that only Phil could see most of the time, only briefly acknowledging the boy when he needed to get past him to stoke the fire or a glance in his direction when he made one of his odd chirps or hums while sleeping on the couch. Techno was operating under the assumption he always did when it came to strangers in the few times they encountered other hybrids in their neck of the woods; that their presence was only temporary, so why bother?

Though the assumption that this was temporary was not far fetched. Phil had been meaning to talk to Ranboo about what came next. He brought the tea over in a large ceramic mug. Ranboo closed his book as Phil approached, holding it closed with both hands. His fingers were long enough that they overlapped on the cover.

"it's hot," he warned as Ranboo set the book down beside him, taking the mug.

"Thank you," the boy said. Ranboo was nothing if not polite. Phil wondered how many of the words he had spoken so far were "thank you." It must be half at least. He sat down on the chair facing the fireplace to warm up a bit, shaking out his shoulders. Carefully, so as to not knock anything over, he stretched his wings out behind him. The dark black feathers spread out as he did, revealing the lighter charcoal and grey ones underneath. As they fanned out behind him, they captured the heat from the fire. He shook them out before tucking them back against his body.

Ranboo stared at him with awe.

“I start feeling cramped stuck in here this long,” Phil said. Ranboo blinked, adjusting his gaze slightly downward before speaking.

“They’re very pretty,” he said. “Can you... can you actually fly?” Philza chuckled at that.

“Yeah, I can. I can show you once the storm blows over if you’d like.” Ranboo’s eyes lit up with intrigue.

“Is it hard?” he asked.

“Eh,” Phil said, considering the question. “It was a learning curve at first. Now it’s just natural. Like walking.” Ranboo nodded, his eyes examining the spots where Philza’s wings peeked out from behind his back. Phil let them unfurl and relax a bit.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen something like that before,” Ranboo said. “Someone who can fly.” He paused, his brow furrowing slightly. “Or I don’t think I have.”

“It’s certainly uncommon,” Phil said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t ever meet one of us again.” Ranboo hummed lightly. The sounds he made always intrigued Phil. “You know, I’ve never met someone like you before either.”

“Like me?” Ranboo asked, looking up. When the two of them spoke, Ranboo never truly made eye contact, always looking just slightly to one side of Phil’s face, or just below his gaze.

“Do you remember when I told you about hybrids?” Ranboo nodded.

“I think so,” he said.

“There are some more common ones, depending on their origin mob. Pigmen are all over the Nether, so hybrids like Techno—” Phil jerked his head in Technoblade’s direction, and Ranboo glanced that way as well without moving his head, as though he didn’t want to be caught looking at the man. If Techno noticed his name being spoken, he didn’t acknowledge it. “aren’t rare to see. Phantoms like me are a bit more uncommon. But you...” Philza couldn’t help but let his intrigue show through in his voice. Ranboo pulled his shoulders back, straightening up at the attention. His ears pulled back slightly. “I’ve just never seen a mob like you before.”

“Oh...” Ranboo said. The feathery end of his tail flicked at his ankles. “Interesting.”

“That actually brings me to my next question,” Phil said. “Any chance you’ve remembered anything about where you came from? Your home, family...?” Ranboo pulled his ears back further. A look of near shame crossed his face, and he shifted, glancing down at the cup of tea in his hands. Philza already knew the answer. “That’s alright,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

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“I’m trying,” he said. “Things just keep... slipping. I can’t get my head straight.” He looked frustrated. Philza could understand why.

“The storm’s dying down. Once it does, I’ll have a look around. If there’s some sign of where you came from, it’ll be easier to see from above anyway,” Phil said, punctuating this with a sip of his tea. Ranboo nodded, some tension leaving him as he relaxed a bit at the idea.

“Thank you,” he said. He looked down at the mug in his hand, swirling it slightly before taking a sip.

When he drank, he closed his eyes, and it reminded Phil of Techno. The man always closed his eyes when he drank tea, breathing in the steam as he did in a very particular way that Phil had come to expect each time. Philza wondered absentmindedly how Ranboo’s sensitivity to water worked. Clearly he could drink it. It must be a skin contact issue, then. How peculiar.

“This is good,” Ranboo said, looking back up to Philza.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling. He took pride in his tea. That, and his cooking. Warmth was a simple pleasure in the frigid landscape of the tundra. “I get the leaves from a village a few miles north.” Ranboo nodded, taking another sip. As he did, his tail flicked gently, wrapping itself around his ankle. “Can I ask you a bit of an odd question?”

“Hm?” Ranboo hummed, glancing his way.

“How—” He reconsidered his phrasing. “Do you know how old you are?” Ranboo considered this, clearly thinking hard. His eyes drifted up and to the left like he was solving a riddle in his head.

“I’m not sure,” he said. Out of the corner of his eye, Philza saw Techno lift his face from his book, looking over toward the two of them. His expression hadn’t changed in the slightest, but somehow Philza knew what the look meant anyway. “I feel... young, though... I think.”

“You look young,” Phil said.

“I do?” Phil looked at Ranboo, but Ranboo stared intently into the teacup in his hand, blinking at it. Phil thought maybe he was trying to look at his reflection in the water. He wondered if he should mention that there was a mirror by the front door, but the thought made him realize he hadn’t actually seen Ranboo stand up from his spot on the couch yet.

When he or Techno moved around, he would watch them, or he would watch the window, or occasionally shift to face the fire. Phil had offered him a book two or three times, but Ranboo would shake his head and politely decline. It had been six days since they found the kid, and almost three days now since he'd actually become responsive. He wondered if Ranboo got up at night to stretch his legs. He found himself wishing he could do more to make the boy comfortable, to feel more at home...

This is temporary, he reminded himself. The cabin fell back into silence, punctuated only by the crackle of the fire and the howl of wind outside.

Thaw

Chapter Summary

When he looked closer, the gem appeared to be almost fluid, shifting slightly in the light like a pool of water. He felt pulled toward it, entranced. It was beautiful, sparkling with colors that swirled and sparkled and bounced light around between shades of midnight blue and emerald green. Subconsciously, he reached for it, hesitantly scooping it into the palms of his hands. It fit comfortably, heavy and solid in a way that felt strangely natural.

It began slowly, unnoticeable at first; a subtle catch in his breathing, a shakiness in his eyes, things beginning to seem just out of focus enough to feel strange. A dull static began to build in his ears. He couldn't take his eyes away, though, as if something was holding him there, encouraging him to look, forcing him to look.

Two days later, the blizzard came to an end. Snow fell lightly in short flurries, but the wind had died down. For the first time in a week, Ranboo could see the landscape surrounding Philza and Techno's home.

As soon as the storm began to slow, the steady monotony that Ranboo had grown used to was gone in an instant. Technoblade and Philza went from lounging indoors, passing time and curing their boredom in whatever way they could, to a state of bustling action. First thing that morning, they seemed to know exactly what they needed to do, pulling on thick fur lined boots and heavy coats.

"The crops need to be uncovered," Phil had explained. "Snow shoveled, barn cleared and cleaned. Got a whole list of chores." He had sighed, seemingly exhausted just at the thought of it. "You can help yourself to whatever you need. Techno and I might be in and out a few times."

Which left Ranboo now, standing in the kitchen and looking out at the land in front of the cabin. Techno and Phil pushed heaps of snow off of huge tarps that Ranboo hadn't even seen under the piles. He could tell they were talking to each other, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. He watched, leaning over the counter to look out the little window.

It had been a while since he stretched his legs out, straightened his back, shook the tension from his body. Despite the uncertainty he felt towards his situation, he was beginning to feel less on edge, far more comfortable with the constant presence of others around him. Philza always spoke to him with a sort of lighthearted nonchalance that made the world seem far less dire. Techno, despite not really paying Ranboo any attention, generally regarded Ranboo with neutrality, certainly with no hostility, which was all Ranboo could really reasonably ask for all things considered.

When he finally stood, his joints cracked like ice spread thin over water.

Outside, Techno said something and kicked a bit of snow in Philza's direction, to which Philza responded by throwing a whole shovel-full of snow at Techno. It seemed they would be outside working for quite a while, and in their absence, Ranboo endeavoured to have a look around the cabin for the first time since he woke.

This was, of course, an option right from the start. Nothing was holding him to his spot in the corner of the couch other than his own uncertainty. But with the liberation of no longer feeling watched came a curiosity toward the space around him.

He turned from the window, observing the small kitchen. There was a black metal stove with a chamber underneath to light a fire, a few pots still on the flat top that were drying after being washed. Two towels hung from the cabinet knobs, one drastically more worn than the other. In the cabinets, there were carved wooden bowls and mugs, a few clay plates, large pots and pans. The windowsill held a few trinkets; a set of wooden dice with worn dots, a clay model of what Ranboo thought looked like a cow (maybe a horse?), a glass bottle with something bright red inside. On the wall by the stove there was a framed portrait drawn with charcoal on browned paper of a young man Ranboo didn't recognize as either Phil or Techno. It was clearly an old drawing. The paper seemed soft, rolling up at one of the corners.

He wandered a bit from there, looking around the living room. There, he didn't have to hunch to avoid hitting his head on lanterns. The ceiling was higher, stretching up to the roof. The living room was similarly decorated, small objects resting on shelves and tables, a few framed papers. Some were drawings, sketches, and some were maps, or pages from books with elaborate illustrations. A music disk was hung from a nail, shiny black with a dark green center. Ranboo vaguely remembered hearing music from a similar disk at one point, but he couldn't pinpoint the memory, as per usual.

At the far wall of the room was the bookshelf Technoblade frequented during their time indoors. It was densely packed, hardly any space at all left between the leather bound books. There were stacks of paper piled up on the top of the shelf and stuck between books, hanging out in a way that made Ranboo nervous they'd fall and scatter on the floor. Even so, he didn't dare touch them.

Some of the books had titles on the spines— *Enchantments of Armor: Protections*; *Ruins of Quorora*; *Book of Thorns*; *The Bastion*; *The Lost City of Mizu*. The titles meant very little to him, but they piqued his curiosity. He wondered if he'd ever read their contents. With how vigorously Techno plowed his way through these pages, they must contain something interesting. Even so, he refused to touch them. Technoblade struck him as a man who valued his property, and even though the books were in Philza's space, they seemed forbidden to him somehow.

He stepped back from the shelf and looked around the room. Being alone felt strange and familiar at the same time. After spending the last several days in the constant company of others, it felt a bit relieving to exist on his own, even if only for a few moments. He stretched his back, straightening out to his full height and reaching his arms up over his head. He let his tail flick out behind him, let his ears pull back, let himself take a deep breath that filled his lungs and made his chest fill.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement, and snapped his attention toward it only to find that it was his own reflection in a mirror by the front door of Philza's cabin. He stared at it from across the room. From a distance, his figure in the mirror was blurred, bent slightly out of proportion, making him appear strangely long in his torso and short in his legs. As he approached, though, the image became clearer, more recognizable.

When Philza had told him he looked young, he didn't know quite what to make of that at the moment. To him, youth came with an implication of innocence, perhaps, or of softness, or of curiosity or energy. Ranboo didn't feel like he could recognize any of those in himself. Looking at himself in this mirror, he didn't know if he could recognize himself at all. How could his own reflection feel so unfamiliar?

With one hand, he pushed his hair back from his forehead, observing the small cuts there left from when he was found in the woods. While Philza hadn't told him explicitly what they were from, he could assume from the shape and placement that he had made them himself, with his own nails. At his hairline and temples, there were tiny raised scars, similar in shape and size, already healed over. He let his hair fall back.

Maybe he did look young. Certainly younger than Phil or Techno. Certainly not an adult. But he could see why Phil said it. He had big eyes, high cheekbones, smooth skin aside from the flecks of color and scarring, thick messy hair.

It was like Philza had said, too; he had never seen anything like him. Or at least, not that he remembered of course. His eyes were what caught his attention the most. Eyes were overwhelming. His own were no different. Red on the left, green on the right, each split by dark slits down the middle that adjusted very slightly as his gaze flicked from one to the other. Surrounding those pupils, though, his irises seemed almost to swirl like clouds or rough water, shifting, hypnotizing. In some ways, he found them intriguing, mesmerizing. But mostly, he found his own gaze to be piercing, like a warning of danger. Like a snake. A bird of prey.

He blinked, and his reflection blinked back. He let out a sigh, and as he did, he made a soft sound like a chirp somewhat involuntarily. He turned from the mirror. There were a small hallway to the left of the front door. At the far end was a staircase leading to the second floor. He went down the hall a bit. More picture frames were hung on the walls there; another map, this one with an “x” drawn somewhere over the ocean; a building plan for what looked like a shed; another charcoal drawing, this one of a few mushrooms and a plant Ranboo didn’t recognize.

He cautiously opened a door to his left that creaked on its hinges. It led down to a basement with cold air drafting up from below, probably a cold cellar he assumed. The stairs were steep and dark. He closed the door. As he did, something on the windowsill at the end of the hall caught his eye.

It glinted with the light that bounced off the snow outside, a dark emerald green gem of some kind. He approached it. Up close, he wasn’t sure what it was. It appeared to be half of a round orb, shattered and jagged at the top where it had cracked in two. In the cross section, he could tell it was dark in the middle, almost black, and got gradually lighter as it went out. From the top, it looked almost like a chunk of ice in texture.

When he looked closer, the gem appeared to be almost fluid, shifting slightly in the light like a pool of water. He felt pulled toward it, entranced. It was beautiful, sparkling with colors that swirled and sparkled and bounced light around between shades of midnight blue and emerald green. Subconsciously, he reached for it, hesitantly scooping it into the palms of his hands. It fit comfortably, heavy and solid in a way that felt strangely natural.

It began slowly, unnoticeable at first; a subtle catch in his breathing, a shakiness in his eyes, things beginning to seem just out of focus enough to feel strange. A dull static began to build in his ears. He couldn't take his eyes away, though, as if something was holding him there, encouraging him to look, forcing him to look.

In the buzz of noise, there were sounds, fragments of words, a voice that wasn't quite making itself heard. He felt numb, frozen but not cold, held in place, something telling him to wait, telling him to listen.

Eventually, the voice became clear.

Look, it said, a whisper that made his skull itch. *Look for the eye*. He blinked. The gem swirled. *Look for the eye*. It was becoming clearer with each word, with each repetition. *Look—*

A sudden sting interrupted this trance, burning at the back of his neck. It made him jump, jerking him out the daze he had found himself in and propelling him back into the current moment with such force that he let out a startled sound at the intersection of shock and confusion and pain. He backed away from the window, looking around in search of the source of the sting. He put a hand to the back of his neck.

Then he remembered the weight in his other palm, the gem. He didn't remember picking it up, but here it was nonetheless. He ran his fingers over the jagged top, confused.

A drop of water fell from above and landed on the side of his forearm.

It stung, just like the back of his neck, and he drew his arm back sharply with a hiss and nearly dropping the gem entirely. He shifted it into his other hand, shaking his arm out before looking down at the newly reddened skin. It wasn't a bad burn, but it was sore even so.

He looked up, noticing a small spot of moisture on the ceiling up above, darkening the wood there. He stepped back as another drop fell, watching it fall to the floor and land in a small

puddle under the windowsill that he hadn't noticed before.

"Ranboo?" He jumped at the voice, almost dropping the gem for a second time and whipping around to find Philza standing at the front door, boots coated in snow. Phil looked at him, then at the gem in his hands, and then back to him. "Having a look around?" His voice was kind, as always, offering a genuine question.

"Um," Ranboo said, blinking. "Yes. Sorry. I hope that's alright?" Phil shrugged.

"Sure. I was surprised you hadn't sooner," he said. He thudded his boots against the doorframe, knocking the snow off that had stuck to the bottoms before stepping into the kitchen and getting himself a cup of water. Ranboo realized he was still holding the gem quickly turned to place it back on the sill.

There's um. There's a leak," he said as he turned back to the kitchen. Philza looked up at him.

"Hm?" Ranboo pointed up to the ceiling at the wet spot that was growing just as another drop fell to the floor beside him. He stepped out of the way, pulling his arm away from it so as to not get hit by the falling water again. "Oh."

Phil sighed, looking at the spot with mild annoyance. He turned, opening up a cabinet, then a second, then a third before finding a large metal bucket to place over the puddle. Ranboo stepped out of his way as he did, flattening himself as much as he could against the wall. A drop of water plinked as it hit the tin. As he stood up straight after placing it, he looked up at Ranboo in the small space of the hallway they shared. He looked the boy up and down.

"Forgot how tall you were," he said, smiling slightly and breathing out a short laugh. Ranboo looked to the side, his tail flicking at his ankle, and Phil stepped back into the kitchen. He took another large gulp of water. "Speaking of which. I wanted to ask a favor, if you're up to it?" Ranboo looked up. "There's some loose boards up in the rafters of the barn a bit out of reach for me and Techno. They just need a few nails, nothing too difficult."

"Oh. Um, sure," Ranboo said. Couldn't be too hard to nail a few boards in place, right? It would be hard to mess up.

“Yeah?” Ranboo nodded. “Great,” Philza smiled. “I really didn’t feel like pulling the ladder out just for that,” he said with a laugh. “I’ve got boots that might fit you, I think. Got them from the village for Techno but they were too big.”

He went off, rummaging in a chest in the corner of the living room. Ranboo walked to the kitchen, watching him. He noticed the jacket he wore left his wings out, fabric and fur criss-crossing in the back. Ranboo hadn’t given it much thought, but upon considering it, he was sure Phil must have to get creative with his clothing given the extra appendages. He emerged from the chest with a pair of dark, worn boots lined at the top with wool.

“Try these on,” Phil said, depositing the boots into Ranboo’s hands.

“Thank you,” Ranboo said. He sat on the couch, bringing one knee to his chest to pull the boots on. His feet were still sore from the burns he had gotten from standing in the snow that day Phil and Techno found him, but they were far, *far* better than they had been before. Whatever concoction Phil had put together in that salve, it worked wonders. The boots fit for the most part, a bit cramped at the toes, but they went on. Ranboo wasn’t about to complain. He didn’t have shoes in the first place, so anything was appreciated.

“Here, this too,” Phil said as he stood up, handing him a long, battered jacket with buttons down the front. He did them up as Phil opened the door. When he turned to check that Ranboo was coming, he smiled and stifled a laugh. Ranboo raised his eyebrows, confused as to what he had done that was funny. “Sorry, sorry. That coat goes down to the floor on Techno.” Ranboo looked down to the hem of the coat which fell at his knees. When he looked back up, Phil was shaking his head and smiling. “This way,” he said. Phil gestured out the door, and Ranboo exited the cabin for the first time since he arrived there however many days ago... they all seemed to blur together after a certain point.

The crisp cold air washed over him as soon as he stepped out. It made him hold his breath at first. The light reflected off the snow in a blinding white, but as his eyes adjusted and his lungs brought air back in, he felt more awake than he had felt in days. The cold felt surprisingly good.

“Nice to get fresh air, yeah?” Phil asked. He closed the door behind them with a click. Ranboo nodded. A gentle wind passed through the tundra, ruffling his hair and making his

ears prick with cold.

The landscape was stunning, far more beautiful than he could have expected only observing it through the windows in the cabin. In front of the house, flat land stretched out in every direction. It was bordered on three sides by a thick forest of tall dark trees with deep green needles. In front of the house, there was a lake, frozen solid with ice. Snow blew across it, scarcely touching the surface as it was carried off by the wind. The lake seemed to stretch on forever with no end in sight.

“There’s not much out here,” Phil said, noticing that Ranboo was looking around. “Further west is just flat tundra for miles. but the wind there makes it impossible to grow anything. Here, we’ve got the forest for firewood and hunting, and we can go ice-fishing in the lake when its frozen over enough. And then there’s a village up north, and another one pretty far to the east.” The snow coated the trees in thick sheets, clumps falling to the ground when the wind blew. The sun on the snow made everything look like it was sparkling with light.

“It’s very pretty here,” Ranboo said.

“Picturesque, as Techno says.” Ranboo nodded in agreement. Near the lake, Techno was folding up a huge tarp. He walked one corner over to the other, revealing sprigs of green leaves as he did. Ranboo was surprised they could grow crops here, but clearly they were having great success. “The barns are this way.”

Philza walked Ranboo over to two structures that sat at the edge of the forest. Their boots left deep tracks in the snow. As they walked, Ranboo looked over to find Technoblade watching them pass by, his gaze following the two of them intently. He made a distinct effort not to look at the man. He couldn’t figure out exactly how Techno felt towards him, but it didn’t feel like compassion. And even when he was occupied with something else, Ranboo felt somewhat watched. Studied. He wondered what he was looking for.

Phil showed him the planks up in the rafters of the barn, showed him how to nail the boards back to the roofing structure, how to hold the nails so he wouldn’t hit his fingers. His first try was a bit crooked, but as it turned out, he was a fast learner. The barn was warm, to his surprise, populated by cows who mooed softly and huffed at the stranger in their midst. Phil cleaned out the old hay while Ranboo worked on the boards. He swept it into a pile by the door, climbed to the hayloft to get more and refill the cows’ troughs. As he did, he told Ranboo the cows’ names, their ages, the story of the newest one’s birth (Esther, they called

her, a little fuzzy calf who came out missing an ear but otherwise seemed perfectly content with life).

When he caught Ranboo staring at the little calf, enamoured, he called him over and pulled something out of his pocket. As Ranboo approached, he placed a hard honey candy in his palm.

“Hold it out like this,” he said, opening his hand with his palm up to the sky, fingers stretched out. “Otherwise she’ll get your fingers.” Hesitantly, he offered the candy to Esther, who took it with excitement. Her tongue felt strange on Ranboo’s palm, much more rough than he was expecting. He watched her with wide eyes, such a beautiful little thing so new to the world, so delighted by something so simple.

It felt very domestic to Phil. Like they had known each other for far longer than a week. Ranboo studied his surroundings with such a focused gaze, but even so his eyes still spoke a thousand words; enthralled by the landscape, absorbed in Philza’s lessons on construction, enamoured by the calf. He wore his emotions on his sleeves. It was refreshing. When they were done in the barn, it was nearly time for lunch, the sun already high in the sky.

“Once we’re done setting up the farm, I’ll head out and take a look around. You mentioned trees and a cave, right? Anything else?” Ranboo thought hard, his brow furrowing.

“I don’t think... no, I think that’s it.” Phil nodded. “I’m sorry, I know that’s not much.”

“There’s quite a few trees around here,” Phil said lightheartedly. “But I’ve got a good eye. You’ve got to have a home somewhere, right?” He had expected Ranboo to nod, or even to have some confidence in this statement, but instead the boy just looked down at the hay by his feet.

If he was being honest, Philza wasn’t confident in the statement either. He knew this area like the back of his hand, regularly flying laps between villages, out to different foraging spots, and generally checking up to make sure things were the same as usual. He and Techno didn’t like being surprised. Which made it all the more strange that Ranboo managed to show up out of nowhere, with no sign of his approach, of a shelter in the woods or a fire or tracks in the snow.

There was nothing around for miles aside from the villages, and they certainly would have mentioned a creature like Ranboo. He wasn't exactly subtle.

Philza didn't say this, of course. Ranboo already seemed to be unsure of his origins. It wouldn't help anyone to add even more uncertainty onto that.

He needed to speak with Techno, alone. If he found some sign of Ranboo's family in the woods, someone to leave the boy with and be sure he was safe, great. That solved the puzzle for all of them. But if he didn't, as he suspected he wouldn't, Philza didn't know where to go from there. He was sure Techno was thinking the same thing. The two of them tended to be on the same page, which in this moment meant they both were considering the same *what if* s.

It could be worse, he supposed. They could have easily encountered some hostile mob, or worse, some hostile person. Ranboo could have been violent, destructive, dangerous. He could have been a threat. He could have given Techno a reason to use that axe. He was grateful at the very least that Ranboo was peaceful, albeit a bit confusing. More than peaceful, even; he was polite, and helpful now. Techno had avoided acknowledging his presence as long as he could, but it was time to start considering what came next. Maybe tonight they could go to Techno's cabin to talk in private.

He sighed, brushing his hands together to shake off the bits of hay and dust from his palms. Ranboo looked over at him.

"Lunch?" Phil asked. Ranboo nodded. They headed back inside.

Eye to Eye

Chapter Summary

“Seems like quite the mystery,” she said. Phil smiled at that, but Maria’s expression was serious. “Be careful, Phil. Children don’t just... appear in the woods. And this one sounds particularly strange.”

“We’re always careful, don’t you worry. He’s much nicer than I’m making him out to be. Very polite boy.”

“I’m being serious,” she said. He nodded.

“I know. I won’t deny it’s bizarre. That’s why I’m trying to look into any clue I can. I can’t just throw him out into the snow.”

“Of course you can’t,” she said. “You’re too kind for that.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While Philza had not been particularly optimistic that he would find some sign of Ranboo’s home or family, it certainly would have been nice to find anything even remotely indicating his origins. Flying over the forest, everything was exactly the same as he left it, albeit with a few inches more snow. The unfortunate truth was that Phil could no longer track Ranboo’s path, either. The timing was terrible. When they’d found the boy, the burns on his feet had been so severe that he had left dark purple tracks of blood in the snow. As painful as that seemed, if it hadn’t been for the snowstorm Phil would have easily been able to track his trail back through the forest. Now, snow and wind obscured any possible signs of his path. Broken branches meant nothing in the wake of the high winds, and tracks, or even a campfire, would be long since buried by now.

He searched despite this. He owed it to Ranboo to search. Well, he supposed, he didn’t actually *owe* the child anything. In fact, Ranboo probably owed *them* for bringing him in from the storm... but in any case, he had promised to search, so he would. Philza kept his promises.

But on top of that, Ranboo had mentioned that he felt like he had been running from something, and while that could easily have been an animal (or frankly, given Ranboo’s state of mind at the time, potentially even a hallucination), Phil didn’t like the idea of leaving a

loose end like that uninvestigated. If there was some danger nearby, he wanted to know about it. And for Ranboo to remember this, but not anything else... it was worth looking into.

At the very least, he could narrow down his search. They had found him in the woods behind the barns to the east. It was unlikely he would have come from across the tundra plains, as nothing could really survive in that direction for a long ways. When they found him, his tracks led further off behind him, not back north behind the cabins, which pointed Philza in the general direction of the east woods and the village out that way.

He beat his wings hard, propelling himself up above the treeline. From there, he could see the little puffs of smoke rising from the village fireplaces, forges, and smokers, and he took off in that direction. He always did enjoy going to the villages around here. The east village was his favorite of the two, and was also conveniently the closer one. The villagers there were kinder, always happy to see his and Techno's faces come through their gates. They had quite a few adventurers among them and wandering traders who brought back goods from far off places.

Much like Techno and Phil had been doing, the villagers were bustling about, shoveling snow away from doors, fixing structures damaged by the wind, and overturning the frozen soil in their farms. When Philza landed, scattering light snow around him, he was met with welcoming smiles, as well as the usual group of children running to him immediately. He couldn't help but grin as they called for him.

"Mr. Philza!" one of the younger boys exclaimed. The formality applied to his name always made him chuckle.

"Hello Everett," he said. The boy was holding a sheaf of wheat in his arms, which he shifted closer to his chest as he straightened up to look up at Phil. "Are you helping clear the fields?" Phil asked, and Everett nodded enthusiastically.

"Mom says if we have extra, we'll make pastries from the flour!"

"I want to make a chocolate one," one of the younger girls, Etta, piped up from behind him.

"Sounds lovely," Phil smiled. They both grinned. Everett was missing one of his canine teeth, making him look even more goofy than he already appeared with his wild hair and forever-

dirty clothing. Philza always loved seeing the kids here, but he was here for a reason this time. “Where is your mother now?”

“She’s out back with Amy right now, I think,” Everett said, looking back over his shoulder. “Are you staying very long this time?”

“Not this time,” Phil said, shaking his head. “You keep working hard, yeah?” Everett nodded enthusiastically. Phil patted him on the shoulder as he ran off to deliver the wheat to the flour mill, Etta trailing at his heels, and Philza turned to walk towards the carrot farm.

“Maria?” He called, walking up to the fence surrounding the farmland. He leaned against it with his elbows on one of the post and smiled as he spotted a familiar head of curly brown hair pop upright in the field.

“Phil!” She exclaimed. Her oldest daughter, Amy, popped her head up as well, looking over. Phil waved at the two of them. Amy waved back, a soft smile on her face. Maria stood, brushing her hands off on her pants as she walked over. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon after the storm,” she said. “Everything alright?”

“More or less,” Phil said. “Doesn’t look like you all took too much damage?”

“A few missing shingles from the roofs, a few trees knocked down. Nothing terrible. Orell’s shack was blown away a bit, but he’d been meaning to tear that thing down for months, so...”

“Win-win,” Philza said, and she smiled.

“Something like that. What brings you by?”

“Well, I’m looking for something actually. I know you’ve got an eye out for everything that goes on here,” he said.

“Oh?” She looked intrigued. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m... well, I’m not sure exactly.” She raised her eyebrows. “Don’t spread it around too much, but Techno and I sort of... well, we came across a child lost in the woods.”

“What?” She said, her eyes widening. “From one of the other villages?”

“No, I don’t think so. And I don’t think he’s from around here, unless you’re missing a very tall black and white hybrid.”

“Black and...” she shook her head in confusion. “I think I’d have heard about that if we were. What kind of hybrid? Interesting to see another one of you in these parts.”

“I thought the same,” Phil said. “And we aren’t actually sure of his origin. He’s an odd one. And unfortunately, he doesn’t remember where he came from.” She nodded in understanding.

“Well, I wish I could tell you that sounded familiar... black and white, you say?”

“Yes, split right down the middle. Tall as a door. Maybe taller.” She looked surprised to hear it. “And, what else... he’s got a tail, too. And ears... kind of like a lamb’s? They look a bit like Techno’s, actually.”

“That’s, well,” she huffed. “That’s quite a character, isn’t it?” Phil nodded. “You met him where, exactly?”

“East woods. Er, west from here, I suppose. We found him in the forest right before the storm.”

“You know, Phil, I was expecting this story to start making sense at some point,” she said, brushing her hands against each other. Phil chuckled.

“You and me both,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I’m gathering it doesn’t ring a bell?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” she said.

“How about any odd sounds? Would have been before the storm, something like a howl.”

“A howl?” He nodded. She considered this for a moment. “Let’s see... there was a strange noise to the north a while back. I don’t think I’d call it a howl, though. Ennis said it was a boar, he seemed pretty sure of it. But that’s about it.” He nodded, sighing, and opened his mouth to answer before she cut him off. “Oh! Rose said Ilya heard a noise the other night, a few days before the storm. He said it was keeping him up, but she couldn’t hear anything when she went to check. Could have been a dream, of course. She was more annoyed that he woke her up, but if you want you could talk to him?”

“Interesting,” he said. “I’ll have a chat with him. Couldn’t hurt. I appreciate your help.”

“Seems like quite the mystery,” she said. Phil smiled at that, but Maria’s expression was serious. “Be careful, Phil. Children don’t just... *appear* in the woods. And this one sounds particularly strange.”

“We’re always careful, don’t you worry. He’s much nicer than I’m making him out to be. Very polite boy.”

“I’m being serious,” she said. He nodded.

“I know. I won’t deny it’s bizarre. That’s why I’m trying to look into any clue I can. I can’t just throw him out into the snow.”

“Of course you can’t,” she said. “You’re too kind for that.” He smiled sheepishly, looking away. “Tell Techno I say hi,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder affectionately before turning back to the field.

“I will,” he said quietly before turning to go off in search of Ilya. The boy was a bit older than Everett, but still young. He was a quiet kid, but on occasion quite mischievous. He found him shoveling snow out of the corners of one of his neighbors’ front porches. He was poking at a particularly dense patch of ice, but when Philza cleared his throat he startled at the noise and turned.

“Oh,” he said. “Hi.”

“Hi Ilya,” Phil said with a smile.

“Um. Are you looking for my mom?” Phil shook his head.

“Actually, I had a question for you.”

“Me?” He nodded. “Oh. Okay.” He held the shovel in front of him, propped up on its tip against the wooden porch.

“Maria— um, Everett’s mother— told me that you were kept up a little while back because of a strange noise.” Ilya blinked at him. The boy reminded Phil a lot of Technoblade in that his expression hardly changed no matter what emotion he felt. It made him a very hard person to read.

“I don’t think so,” he said. The response surprised Phil. “I don’t remember a noise.” Phil raised his eyebrows.

“Are you sure?” Ilya nodded. “She said your mother complained to her that you woke her up. It was before the storm.” Ilya’s gaze flicked to the side, then back to Phil.

“Oh. Right. That was just the wind, though.”

“Is that what your mom said?”

“No,” he shook his head. “She didn’t hear it. But I know it was the wind, ‘cus I checked my window and it was open a bit. So it made a noise when it came through.”

“You didn’t hear it again?”

“Not once I closed the window,” he shrugged, shifting the shovel from one hand to the other. “Why?” Phil knew he probably shouldn’t reveal too much about Ranboo just yet, just in case. And his description admittedly could sound a bit scary, especially to a child.

“Just trying to track down an elk Techno saw before the blizzard rolled in,” he said, and Ilya nodded. “He likes a good hunt.”

“Dad brought an elk home once. It made good stew, actually. Better than deer,” the boy said casually. Phil hummed.

“You’re sure it was just the wind? They make an odd sound, elk. Pretty loud.” Ilya nodded again.

“Just the wind,” he said. He blinked at Philza again. Phil sighed.

Whether or not Ilya truly believed the noise he heard was the wind, he certainly didn’t seem disturbed by it. Not in the way he would have expected a child to be if he heard the sound Techno and Phil had heard. Ranboo’s cry was piercing, unsettling. It had made him feel unnerved and uneasy when he heard it the first time. If he was a child asleep in bed, he would have been terrified. But Ilya seemed entirely unbothered. Another dead end, it seemed.

“Well, if you hear anything by the next time I stop by, be sure to let me know. I’d like to find that elk,” he said, and Ilya gave him a soft smile in return.

“I’ll be sure to keep an ear out,” he said.

On his way out of the village, Phil stopped by Gladin’s shop for some more healing potions and burn salves now that his stock had been somewhat depleted treating Ranboo. Gladin tended to mention things that were out of the ordinary, but she had nothing to report aside from the usual village gossip, who overcharged who, a sale on excess bread from last batch. He picked up a dozen pumpkin pastries from Amaly, Techno’s favorite of the village bakers, before saying his goodbyes and heading off towards his home.

It was, unfortunately, as he predicted. There was no hint of Ranboo’s existence in this area before the storm. Which left him with their second option, and in Philza’s opinion, their only option; to let Ranboo stay.

He and Techno had discussed it at length, which was to say, Philza proposed his idea and Technoblade spent the better part of two hours trying to poke holes in his logic. Perhaps “discuss” wasn’t the right word... Techno was a difficult man to convince. He valued routine. He valued privacy. He didn’t like change. But there was no justification Philza could find for casting the boy out. They had the resources, living comfortably with plenty of excess now after so long living off of the land here. Ranboo had proved himself a fast learner already, and it always helped to have an extra hand in the farms or feeding the animals. And Phil knew the villagers would never house him. As kind as they were, they didn’t take in outsiders. Never had, never would. Philza understood why, considering how harsh and unpredictable strangers could be. When Techno and Philza had first come across the village, they certainly weren’t welcomed with open arms. Trust was earned these days, not given.

But if they turned Ranboo away, he would be left with very few options; survive, or die.

“I don’t need to remind you what it’s like to live like that,” Philza had said. Techno responded by rolling his eyes. “You can’t say I’m wrong.”

“You *are* wrong. We’re hybrids, Phil, all of us. We’re not built to do anythin’ more than *survive*. ” Phil narrowed his eyes in disbelief.

“That’s all this is to you?”

“You know that’s not what I meant. You and I both know the truth of it, though. It’s just how life is, just a game of survival until you get lucky enough to find stability.”

“So because you and I went through that, he should too?”

“Stop askin’ me questions like I have any of the right answers, Phil,” Techno said, becoming irritated again at the conversation.

“I can’t find a way to justify throwing him out into the snow to fend for himself—”

“I *know* you can’t!” Techno snapped. “I *know*. I knew from the second you suggested we take him back home that you wouldn’t be able to let this go until he was *safe*. And I knew that meant that I was the one who had to point out that it’s a risk, who had to be the selfish one, the monster who—”

“You’re not a monster—”

“But I am, aren’t I? That’s the role I play here. You’re makin’ me choose, Phil, a risk for him or a risk for us.” Phil closed his mouth. “But I’m selfish. I’m not like you. I don’t want to lose this.” Silence hung heavy between them. Phil had backed him into a corner, one he hadn’t even seen until now. He’d lost his objectivity, and he knew it. He cared too much. It was always his fatal flaw.

“I’m sorry,” Phil said, sighing and leaning back in his chair. Techno looked surprised to hear it. “I don’t want to lose this, either.”

“You want to help him,” Techno said. “You want to help everyone. It’s... some would say *admirable*. But you need to realize that there could be consequences to this. Bad ones.”

“I’m not saying this is permanent. The kid had to have come from somewhere. Someone’s out there looking for him, and they’ll have a much easier time of finding him if he stays put and waits.” Techno said nothing. “He’ll be a good help, too. You always complain about working the fields.”

“It’s busy work,” Techno muttered.

“It’s all busy work,” Phil replied. “He hasn’t given us a reason not to trust him. And if he does, we’ll handle it.” Techno pinched the bridge of his nose.

He looked up to Phil, and Phil held his gaze. “You’ve got a habit for taking in strays, old man.” Phil scoffed.

“Don’t call me that,” he said, and Techno snorted, and then groaned, rubbing his palm against his eye.

“I really wish you weren’t right all the time. Just be wrong for once. Just once?” Philza smiled. “Even if you’re just fakin’ it. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I take it that means we agree?” Their gazes met once again.

“I said it before, Phil. If he’s a threat, I won’t hesitate.”

“I know.”

There was a pause.

“Then I guess we agree.”

That was that; but now there was this— Philza had to break the news to Ranboo that his past was as much a mystery to them as it was to him, and he truly didn't know how the boy would react to *that* news. He hoped at the very least he would find some comfort in knowing he had a safe place to stay for the time being, until they got this figured out.

When he began to circle above the cabins, he spotted Ranboo sitting outside on the front steps of his porch with his chin resting on his knees. He looked out over the lake, but glanced up when he heard Philza's beating wings approaching. He was on his feet in the blink of an eye, holding his hands close to his chest like he always did when he stood. He always seemed to make himself take up the least amount of space, tightly wound. Phil touched down in a puff of snow, kicking up more flurries as he shook his wings out from the trip. Techno exited the cabin from behind Ranboo. He tossed an apple Phil's way which he caught easily. He always worked up an appetite when he flew.

"Thanks, mate," Phil said, taking a bite from the fruit. He held out the pastries he had bought by the parcel strings, and a brief look of delight passed over Techno's face before he steeled his expression again.

"Amaly?" He asked, walking past Ranboo to take the package.

"Who else?" Techno huffed, a half smile on his face. It was the simple things that made him smile. He stepped back, pulling at the parcel strings as he turned to take the pastries back into the cabin. As he did, Phil turned his attention to Ranboo. The boy was waiting patiently, his tail flicking at his ankles in anticipation. The rest of his body was tense, coiled like a spring. Phil let out a soft breath, clouding the air in front of him.

"I couldn't find anything, kid. Nothing in the woods, and the village hasn't had a sign of anything strange either." Ranboo's ears pulled back, his eyebrows knitting together in uncertainty. "It's hard to track anything after snow, it just buries any signs of a trail, and—"

Phil cut himself off. Ranboo had cast his gaze down, his tail wrapped tightly around one ankle.

“It’s just a setback,” Philza said, trying to lighten his tone. “Doesn’t mean we’re giving up, yeah?” Ranboo swallowed hard and nodded, but the tremble in his body broadcasted his upset. He held his arms close to his chest, digging the nails of his left hand into the pale white skin of his right hand. “Ranboo—” Phil stepped forward, one arm outstretched.

He didn’t know what his intent was, exactly- maybe to stop the boy from cutting into his skin again, maybe to console him. But Ranboo flinched hard, backing away from the touch so abruptly that he hit his head against the wall of the cabin behind him.

“Sorry,” he said. Philza pulled his arm back and stayed put, trying to give him some space. Techno reemerged from the cabin, the pastry box in one hand and a half eaten pumpkin tart in the other. Ranboo backed away from him, too, taking a moment to close his eyes and calm his breathing after being startled. “Sorry,” he said again, this time to Techno, who just raised his eyebrows.

“I didn’t mean—” Philza started, but Ranboo cut him off.

“No, I—” his voice cracked, and he shook out one hand and rubbed his palm over his eye. He shook his head, clearly attempting to control his reaction. Phil wished he could tell him it was alright to be upset, but he had a feeling it would only make things worse right now. “Thank you for trying,” he said.

“I know you probably wanted a better answer,” Phil said. “But this doesn’t mean there’s nothing out there, just that we’re looking in the wrong place.” Ranboo nodded solemnly. “And while we look for the *right* place,” he glanced toward Techno in a sort of quiet confirmation of what he was going to say next, “you’ve got a safe spot here to stay, so don’t get yourself too worked up, yeah?” Ranboo blinked in surprise.

“What... here?” Phil nodded.

“If you want, of course. Techno and I talked it over.” Ranboo let his gaze dart over to Technoblade in the doorway, and Techno shrugged, taking another bite from the tart.

“I don’t... you don’t have to do that. I can just...”

“Just what?” Techno said, his voice muffled by food. Ranboo looked over to him, shocked, and Phil did as well, equally as shocked. Techno hadn’t spoken to Ranboo even once since the boy was found. Phil shot him a warning glance, unsure of what his intent was here. Techno noticed and rolled his eyes. “I’m not bein’ mean,” he said. He turned back to Ranboo. “Walk me through it. What was your plan if you weren’t staying here?”

Ranboo’s eyes were wide. Philza had to admit, Technoblade was an intimidating person, especially to people who didn’t know him. He didn’t like strangers, and he didn’t make friends, and his face constantly settled into a scowl that generally deterred any conversation.

Phil felt lucky to see the softer side of him on a regular basis, the Technoblade that asked for help braiding his hair in the morning, or who fell asleep reading mythologies, or who sat out by the lake making friends with the polar bears that wandered through. But Phil knew it was hard to look past the scowl, the crooked canines that jutted up from his bottom jaw, the scars that flecked his face and neck, or the tears in his ears from jewelry long since torn out. And he knew, now, that *that* was the Technoblade Ranboo saw right now. At least the boy was comfortable enough to regard him with solely uncertainty and not outright fear.

“Come on,” Techno urged. “You must have thought about it all that time you spent starin’ outside.” Phil felt like that was a bit of a simplification of the emotional hurricane Ranboo was likely currently enduring.

“I, um...” Ranboo stammered. “N-north.” Techno raised an eyebrow.

“North.” Ranboo nodded. “Elaborate,” he said, gesturing with his pastry. Ranboo looked to Phil, then back to Techno, and picked at the skin around his fingernails.

“Well... south is the lake, so— so I can’t go that way. And um. Philza said that west is just tundra plains.” Ranboo hesitated saying Phil’s name, looking his way almost to confirm he was saying it right, or like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to say it at all. It reminded Phil of the kids in the village who couldn’t decide if he was *Mr. Philza* or just *Phil*. “And I think I was—” Ranboo’s voice cut off, seemingly unintentionally. He blinked before he continued. “I think I was running from something. Before. To the east.” Technoblade narrowed his eyes, a movement so slight that it was hardly noticeable. “So that leaves north.”

Techno turned to Phil, his eyebrows raised. “It’s not *terrible* logic,” he said. “At least he’s thinking.” Ranboo’s tail unwrapped itself from his ankle, sweeping the ground behind him. Techno turned back to him, and he pulled his ears back again under the man’s gaze. “Still much easier just to stay here.” He took another bite from the tart and leaned against the door frame.

Techno had a way of making everything sound like it was *his* idea, like Philza hadn’t had to talk him into it only a day earlier. For someone who claimed he didn’t care what people thought of him, he sure put a lot of effort into passing himself off as indifferent, uncaring. It was better than shunning the boy, he supposed. At least he had come around to the idea of Ranboo staying with them in the first place.

“You’ve already helped me so much—”

“Take it or leave it, kid,” Techno cut him short. “No one’s makin’ you stay.” Phil shot him another glare.

“What Techno’s *saying* is, it’s an offer. You can stay, help out, figure out your... situation. And in the meantime, you won’t have to worry about surviving on your own.” Techno’s approach was a bit aggressive, but Philza understood why he said it the way he did. Ranboo seemed to be the kind of person to convince himself he was a burden, and Techno was the kind of person who didn’t like to repeat himself. It would be better for them both if Ranboo realized the man meant what he said.

“I...” Ranboo looked between the two of them. “Okay,” he said cautiously. “That sounds better than my plan, really.”

“Doesn’t take much,” Techno said. He finished off his pumpkin tart and pulled another from the box before holding it out to Ranboo. “Take this,” he said, and Ranboo did. “I’ll be in my cellar. Armor needs cleaning.” And with that, he turned and walked across the short path that connected their homes.

“Dinner?” Philza called after him.

“I’ll make my own tonight,” Techno said before disappearing into his cabin. Philza looked back to Ranboo, who was holding the box of pastries like it was a wet cat, entirely baffled in his expression. The sight made Phil smile just a bit.

“You can have one of those, if you want,” he said, walking up the short steps of the porch. The offer seemed to bring Ranboo back to the present.

“I’m alright for now,” he said quietly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t wait too long to have one,” Phil said, taking the box from him. “Techno goes through them pretty fast.” He opened his door, holding it open for Ranboo to come through as well. As he did, he watched the tension begin to melt off of the boy, his shoulders unwinding, ears falling back to a neutral spot. Philza knew it must feel good to have an idea of what the future for him looked like. To know he was safe.

He put the box in the cold chest to keep the pastries fresh.

“I really do appreciate it,” Ranboo said. Phil stood and faced him. “Letting me stay here, I mean. Thank you.” Phil smiled and nodded.

“Wasn’t a difficult choice for me,” he said as he took off his coat. “I think it’d be against my morals a bit to let a child wander off into the woods.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said.

“Not to say Techno *would* do that, of course, but...” Philza gave it an extra moment of thought. He wouldn’t, would he? Well... hm. “I know he’s a bit brash, but he’s a nice guy. Don’t let him intimidate you too much.” *Easier said than done*, he thought.

“Do you think... does he like me?” Phil stepped around Ranboo to hang his coat up on the hooks by the door, brushing off some snow from the hem.

“Probably not,” he said. “But don’t take it personally. For what it’s worth, I don’t think he *dis* likes you. He just... Techno doesn’t trust easy, you know?” He turned. Ranboo nodded. “Too much trust gets you killed.”

“But then, why let me stay?”

“Cus he trusts *me*, ” Phil said, toeing off his boots to let them dry by the door. “And I trust you.”

“You do?” Phil nodded. “Why?” Phil looked up at him. When they were inside like this, close together, Ranboo’s height became far more noticeable. He tried so hard to take up as little space as possible that it was easy to forget he wasn’t *small*. He stood at least a head taller than Phil. If he was a bit more assertive, he’d probably be more intimidating than Techno. But what shocked him now, more than his height, was his eyes.

Ranboo hadn’t met his gaze since that night in the woods, when the boy had frozen him in place with how piercing his gaze was. Then, it had felt like a warning. *Stay back*, it said, *or else*, like a snake’s hiss or a dog’s growl. His gaze didn’t feel like a warning this time, but it was equally as captivating. Ranboo’s eyes were bright, bouncing light around inside them. His pupils, which before had been narrow slits, were wider now, more calm, more friendly. Despite their different colors, the irises were both darker at the center and lighter towards the edges. They were wide, expressive, kind eyes. Familiar.

Ranboo looked away, and Phil realized he must have been sat there staring at the boy without actually answering his question. He blinked, pulling himself back to Ranboo’s question. *Why?*

“You seem genuine, Ranboo,” he said. Ranboo looked back to him. “It’s an impression not many folks give off these days. And—” he considered whether or not he wanted to say his next thought. “You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.” Ranboo tilted his head a bit, curious, but silent. “You have the same eyes.”

this was supposed to be a short chapter... oops. Thanks for all the support on this!

Circadian

Chapter Summary

Techno lifted his eyes to find Ranboo still watching him, but now with softer eyes, curious, confused. He blinked dazedly before looking past Techno, then turning his head to look around him. He was in half time, like he was moving through water. After a moment, he turned his face back up toward the moon. Techno sighed.

“Ranboo, we need to go inside,” he said. The boy had gone back to ignoring him. “Can you hear me?” After a pause, Ranboo chirped. “I don’t know what that means,” he said, exasperated. Ranboo was silent.

There was very little that Techno savoured more than a good night’s sleep.

The long, empty nights were the best; the ones where there were no dreams, where he saw darkness, not a single thought passing through his mind, where time passed slowly. Those nights were like floating in a void, taking a break from the world. Those nights he woke up feeling far awake. They were few and far between.

A tier below that were nights when he managed any amount of sleep at all, no matter the dreams, no matter how often he woke up, no matter how many times he needed to check that his door was locked, or his sword still rested against his bedframe, or his axe still hung by the door. Sleep was sleep. Even an hour or two was enough.

He would kill for that now.

Now, the moon was high, the tundra quiet, lanterns dimmed, curtains drawn, and Techno was wide awake. Laying flat on his back in the bed, he searched his ceiling for patterns or shapes in the dark, eyes straining to find something to focus on in the wooden boards. He knew based on experience that tracking these patterns had never worked, but Phil had told him that it might help one day, and so he tried it every time he hit one of these sleepless streaks just in case it would suddenly, miraculously send him into that void.

Phil was often right about things, but this was one of very few exceptions. He had come to accept, eventually, that there were nights that would simply not work in his favor. This particular streak had lasted two nights, three now if he didn't sleep tonight (as he expected he wouldn't). It was getting to that point where it was just starting to become uncomfortable, where his mouth began to feel sour, and his teeth began to hurt, and his hands were tender for no reason. It wasn't unbearable. He had hit the unbearable point before, and this was far from that. But there was a fear at the back of his thoughts whenever these nights began to hold him hostage that this might go on too long once again.

Perhaps it wasn't worth trying. He would only frustrate himself laying in bed and festering in thought for hours trying to sleep. He would rise in the morning with the sun, even further frustrated by the thought that he could have at least been productive overnight if he already wasn't going to sleep. And this was feeling like a night where he wouldn't sleep. They had a particular feeling to them, one he couldn't articulate, but one he certainly recognized.

He flung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood. The cold floor chilled his feet, and he remained there for a moment, considering what he could do with his time that would feel worthwhile, but not so productive that Philza would notice his work. The man always kept potions stocked for sleep – technically speaking, they were tranquilizers – but Techno always refused them. The feeling of being out of his own control was far worse than the feeling of sleep deprivation, and Phil knew this. At least when Techno kept his insomnia to himself, only one of them had to stew in frustration.

He had already sharpened his sword and axe the night before, polished his armor, repaired a blanked that he'd torn a hole in by accident. The cabin was clean, the dishes washed, the laundry dried. Techno was beginning to think that the only reason he stayed organized was because he had twice as much time in the day than he should.

As he padded down the stairs, he searched for something to occupy his time. There were small things; a mug left on the dinner table that he could cart back to its cabinet, a blanket that could be folded slightly neater, a few crumbs to dust off of the counter. There was a book on the table in the living room entitled *A Terrible Fortress*, open to a page on the anatomy and behaviors of Wither Skeletons. Techno knew all there was to know about the Nether, but that wasn't why he was reading on the mob. Wither Skeletons, as well as Withers, were on his list of potential origin mobs for Ranboo.

While the mystery of Ranboo's circumstance didn't interest Technoblade all that much, the mystery of his hybrid *did*. Techno's knowledge on the various mobs, locations, and realms of

this world was extensive. Before, he would have ventured to say there was nothing more in this world that would surprise him, but then along came Ranboo.

He had theories, none of which had been proven so far. A Wither Skeleton could account for his darker coloring, and perhaps for his lanky build. A Wither was far less likely, but if he had to make a reach, it could potentially account for the tail, the black and white color of his skin... it was a stretch. A Ghast could explain his lighter side, but both Ghasts and Withers were never documented as hybrid origin creatures before, and both were so large and distinct he felt that if he saw one, he would recognize it immediately. Skeleton variations were at the top of Techno's list of possibilities. Perhaps a combination of Wither Skeletons and the average type in some unlikely, rare pairing would account for the duality of color. Strays also held potential, with a gaze that was just as piercing as Ranboo's, but with eyes that didn't match the coloring of course. He had no proven answer so far.

He placed a bookmark between the pages of the book and closed it, bringing it back to its shelf. He could always come back to it later. As he walked over to put it back, he glanced out the window to the familiar sight of the tundra. The front of both cabins faced out toward the lake, a view Techno had grown to love especially at night when the moonlight bounced off the ice and made it sparkle with flecks of purple and blue and pink.

Something was different this time. He tensed, trying to figure out exactly *what* was in his front yard and whether or not it needed killing, before realizing after a moment that it was Ranboo. He let his muscles relax, leaning forward toward the window to get a better look. The kid was standing motionless and shin-deep in the snow, staring up at the moon where it hung overhead. He was motionless, standing so still that Techno doubted he would have noticed him if he didn't know this landscape like the back of his hand. He considered leaving the kid to his own devices for a moment, but as he looked closer, he realized something was off. Ranboo was wearing only his underclothes, the thin cotton shirt and linen pants Philza had given him upon his arrival (if one could call it that). From where he stood, Techno couldn't tell if he was wearing boots, but based on his attire, he doubted it. If he had wandered out there intentionally in that outfit, he was an idiot. But Ranboo had not shown himself to be irrational...

This was something he was going to have to deal with, wasn't it? He would feel too guilty waking up Philza to come handle the boy. If Techno was already awake and aware of the situation, why wake up someone else to handle it simply because he couldn't be bothered? He was already up, and not only that, he had nothing better to do. He sighed, stepping back from the window. He placed the book into its spot on the shelf.

He wondered absentmindedly if his morals were in the wrong place, concerning himself more with his own desire not to deal with the kid in whatever state he was in rather than being concerned *for* the kid himself. He couldn't really chalk that one up to sleep deprivation. Apathy tended to be a flaw of his. He pulled on boots, throwing his cloak around his shoulders, before opening his front door and stepping out onto the front porch. The wind was gentle, the air crisp. Ranboo hadn't moved in the slightest. Techno looked over to Philza's bedroom window which was dark, the lanterns in his house extinguished. Of course they were. Why would he be awake? It was dead quiet.

Philza was a heavy sleeper, rarely woken by the noises of the night, so Techno didn't hesitate to call out to the kid from the porch. If he could avoid walking out into the snow to go get him, it would be much easier. Plus, he would be able to gauge if he was actually responsive.

"Ranboo?" His voice travelled across the plain, but he received no indication that he was heard. "Ranboo!" He called, harsher this time, and with more force. Still, nothing. He hummed a low groan and pulled his cape tighter around his shoulders, stepping off the porch into the snow. He had carved a path already from walking back and forth from the fields and barns to his home and to Philza's, which he followed out to a certain extent before it fell away closer to the lake where Ranboo stood. Wading into deeper snow, he noticed the tracks Ranboo had left were speckled with purple.

As he got closer, he noted the snow around Ranboo's feet was dotted with drops of blood. He was barefoot, small cuts scattered on his shins and ankles and irritated skin where the snow had melted against his feet. *Right*, Techno noted. *Water*. It didn't look terrible like it had when they'd found him first, but it still looked painful. He grimaced. Walking barefoot in the snow would already be difficult to endure from the cold. Adding on the reaction Ranboo's skin had to water was a difficult pain to wrap his head around.

"Ranboo." He still got no answer. The kid stared straight up into the sky, his eyes half lidded and tired. His face was lit by the moon, skin slightly gray from cold. Techno wondered how long he'd been out here. If he hadn't been awake, would he have stayed frozen here until morning? He stopped as he came a few feet from where the kid stood. "*Ranboo.*"

Ranboo turned to face him abruptly, far more quickly than Techno was expecting, and his blood ran cold. He took a step back almost on instinct. Almost instantly, a buzz grew in his head, the same low groan that he and Philza had heard in the woods; a warning. Techno knew better this time. He averted his gaze at the last second before Ranboo caught his eye, looking down and away from that sharp gaze. Ranboo stared at him for several seconds, the groan

remaining at the same volume, and Techno remained frozen where he stood. Eventually, slowly, it began to quiet, fading off until it was silent in the tundra once again.

Techno lifted his eyes to find Ranboo still watching him, but now with softer eyes, curious, confused. He blinked dazedly before looking past Techno, then turning his head to look around him. He was in half time, like he was moving through water. After a moment, he turned his face back up toward the moon. Techno sighed.

“Ranboo, we need to go inside,” he said. The boy had gone back to ignoring him. “Can you hear me?” After a pause, Ranboo chirped. “I don’t know what that means,” he said, exasperated. Ranboo was silent.

Techno ground his teeth as he considered his options. Waking Philza still felt out of the question. Ranboo wasn’t violent, nor was he in immediate danger. He didn’t seem particularly chaotic, still under at least some semblance of control. But the kid wasn’t responsive in any functional sense, and he doubted he could get him to snap out of it just by standing here talking to him. He had to get him inside. That was step one.

“I’m not qualified for this,” he muttered to himself before looking up at Ranboo again. “I’m gonna take your hand, alright?” Ranboo let out another small chirp. Techno decided to take that as an acknowledgement of what he had said. He reached out, forcing himself to be gentle for once, and wrapped his fingers over Ranboo’s. The kid’s hand was cold as ice, and that wasn’t an exaggeration. It was stiff and frozen, the tips of his fingers greying from the temperature.

Techno took a step backwards away from the lake, tugging Ranboo toward him as lightly as he could. He didn’t want the kid to fall over.

Luckily for him, Ranboo was pliable, albeit a bit clumsy in his movements, and began to move with Techno. His feet scuffed through the snow and he stumbled a bit, but at least he was moving. Techno took another step back and Ranboo followed. He moved his limbs with a strange rigidity that Technoblade recognized, remembering the way his feet would feel numb after a day out in the woods hunting, how he would walk flat footed, unable to lift his toes to walk properly. Eventually, Ranboo found his footing at least partially, and they began making slow progress toward Techno’s cabin.

Every couple steps, Ranboo would trip over his feet or stumble on a patch of firmer ice, but they made it back to the front porch without any significant issue. The stairs took a bit of guiding, but Techno got him up them eventually, finally making it back to the front landing. He looked back over to Philza's house. At the very least, he had to pop over there to get the things he needed to dress the cuts on Ranboo's feet. They didn't look bad, no longer bleeding (but perhaps that was from the cold). He walked to his own front door, Ranboo in tow, and led the kid inside.

"Uh..." He gave the kid a once over. He was blinking, looking around aimlessly but seemingly more aware than he was out by the lake. "Stay here," Techno said. Ranboo said nothing. "Stay." He exited the house and made his way across the landing over to Phil's place.

He was in and out quickly, not even bothering to light a lamp. Phil kept the chest with medical supplies organized, kept it right near the front door for ease of access (a forethought which came in handy now). Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Ranboo's memory book on the table by the couch. He considered it for a moment before eventually deciding to take it with him as well. The kid seemed very attached to that book, keeping it on his person almost every moment he was awake. He figured he'd want it. With the book, some burn salve, bandages, and antiseptic in his arms, he headed back.

His front door wasn't open, which was a good sign. Balancing his supplies in one hand, he opened the door to find Ranboo exactly where he had left him, still glancing around the room. This was actually the first time Ranboo had been in his space, actually. It was an odd introduction to the place to be sure. He reached down and took Ranboo's hand again.

"C'mere," he mumbled, and Ranboo obeyed easily. He led him to the couch that sat against the wall by the fire, where the kid stood awkwardly until Techno put a hand on one of his shoulders and pushed him down to sit. It only took the slightest pressure to move him around, and for some reason, that made Techno a bit worried. He studied the kid where he sat. He was looking around more, blinking more almost like he was trying to refocus his gaze. That was a good sign. Techno took a log from beside the fire and put it on the pile in the fireplace to spur on the flame. It sent a wave of warmth into the room.

Step one was warming Ranboo up from the cold. He tossed a blanket around his shoulders, throwing the ends across his lap to cover his hands. He fanned the fire a bit, trying to get it to grow as quickly as possible. Next up was to dress the wounds on his feet and ankles. The cuts were shallow, only a few deeper ones. He knelt down on one knee, setting the book on the table behind him. The majority of the cuts were scratches from the ice. The burns weren't too

bad either, worse on the soles and arches of his feet and speckled up his ankles, but they were nowhere near as bad as they had been the last time he'd gone out barefoot. As he regarded the cuts, trying to figure out where to start, he was startled by the kid's voice.

"Technoblade?" Ranboo said, his voice low and raspy. Techno looked up to find Ranboo watching him intently, confusion clear in his features.

"Oh. You're back, huh?"

"What... where did I go?" He looked around, this time much less sluggish than he was before, but disoriented. Technoblade would be disoriented too if he woke up in an entirely different place than he fell asleep in. "Is this your house?" Ranboo asked.

"Mhm," Techno hummed. He splashed some antiseptic on the gauze.

For a moment, he considered warning Ranboo that it might sting, but he doubted the kid had gotten any feeling back in his feet yet, so he didn't mention it, pressing the gauze into the sole of Ranboo's left foot. Ranboo looked down at him as he did. Techno didn't look up, instead electing to avoid the awkward eye contact altogether and focus on the task in front of him. As he worked, Ranboo pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, a shiver passing through his body.

"You were standin' out by the lake," Techno explained, wiping some of the burn salve over the irritated skin. "Starin' up at the moon or something." He moved on to Ranboo's other foot, the lighter one. The burns were much easier to see on his white side, the irritated skin turning pink as his feet warmed up.

"I was dreaming..." Techno glanced up at him. He was looking into the fire, his brow furrowed, deep in thought trying to piece together his circumstance. "Or, I thought I was dreaming," he said quietly.

"You sleepwalk often?" Techno asked, wiping off the melted snow and dots of blood from Ranboo's ankle.

“I dunno,” Ranboo mumbled.

“Oh. Right.” There was an awkward pause. “Sorry.” Ranboo shook his head, which Techno interpreted as a *no hard feelings* type of gesture. There was one particularly deep cut on Ranboo’s right ankle that Techno saw, noting that he would need to keep an eye on it. He wrapped a strip of gauze around it, tying the ends together in a knot. Wiping the rest of the burn salve off of his fingers with the leftover gauze, he stood from his spot on the floor and walked to the kitchen to throw the soft fabric into the trash and set aside the bottle of antiseptic. While he was there, he filled a mug with water and brought it back.

As he passed it into Ranboo’s hands, he held onto the handle for an extra moment, watching as Ranboo tried to gather enough dexterity in his numb fingers to hold the cup. After a moment of awkward fumbling, he elected to hold it with the palms of his hands, one hand underneath it and one on the side.

“Thank you,” he said, as polite as ever. Techno hummed at him. He turned to the fire, picking up the iron poker from its spot leaned up against the brick and stoking the logs. Little embers flew up into the air as another wave of heat washed out from the blaze. After taking a swig from the mug, Ranboo cleared his throat. “Where’s Philza?” he asked, his voice less strained now.

“Sleeping,” Techno said. He put the poker back up against the wall.

“Oh,” Ranboo said. He looked uncomfortable, and Techno knew better than to assume it was because he was just cold. He knew he made the kid nervous. He hadn’t put a lot of effort into getting to know him, and certainly hadn’t made himself available for idle conversation. The longest they really spoke was when Techno would instruct him on how to place the planks for the new farm or ask him to go get a list of supplies from Philza’s cellar. Ranboo was much closer with Phil. And Techno didn’t blame him. Phil was kind. Techno... well, Techno was not. Not usually.

“I eh... I don’t know how long you were standin’ out there. How ya feelin’?” Ranboo looked down at the mug in his hands. The tips of his fingers were still a little grey.

“I can’t feel my feet,” he said. “Or my hands.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Techno said. “Turn more towards the fire,” he suggested, and Ranboo did, balancing his mug in one hand and planting the other against the couch, pushing himself to the right so his body absorbed more of the heat. His fingers were curled awkwardly in on themselves. As he brought his hand back to the mug, he shook it out briefly. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of the warm air. “What were you dreaming about?” Techno asked. Ranboo opened his eyes.

He hummed, a slight chirp entering the vocalization in an odd way that made him sound half human, half... whatever his hybrid was. “Um... just... the lake. And the moon. Full moon.”

“It’s only a sliver right now,” Techno noted. Ranboo hummed again.

“There was a voice, I think,” he said quietly, blinking at the fire.

“Voice?” He nodded slightly. “Saying what?” He narrowed his eyes, his eyebrows knitted together.

“I don’t know... something about... searching? Searching for something. I don’t remember what.” He rubbed the heel of his palm against his eye, another shiver passing through his body.

“Weird,” Techno said simply. He wouldn’t deny he had dreams like that, some external voice spurring his dream-self into action. He never wandered around in his sleep, though. If he did, dreaming would be much scarier, not just for him. Ranboo looked back over to him.

“How did you know I was there?” He asked. “By the lake?”

“Saw you out the window,” Techno replied.

“You were awake?”

“Uh... yeah.” Techno looked over to the kitchen to the clock that hung on the wall. It was still a couple hours until sunrise. “Couldn’t sleep I guess.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. “I thought maybe I woke you up.”

“Nah,” Techno said. Ranboo nodded.

“Sorry you couldn’t sleep, though.”

“It happens,” Techno said, shrugging his shoulders. “I was lookin’ for something to do to pass the time anyway. This isn’t exactly ideal, but... eh.” Ranboo looked away, casting his gaze back down to the fire, and Techno realized that what he said could easily be taken the wrong way. “Not ideal for *you*, I mean. I was just gonna clean or somethin’ like that, I wasn’t really expectin’...” he decided to just stop talking.

He never managed to say what he actually meant. This was why he always let Philza do the talking. Ranboo winced, pulling one hand away from the mug and shaking it out.

“Can you feel your fingers again?” he asked, grateful for a change in subject.

“They *hurt*,” Ranboo muttered. Techno couldn’t help but feel bad for the kid. He always seemed to be some level of disoriented, checking his memory book several times a day or triple checking instructions on building or even suddenly stopping dead in his tracks when he was mid-task. He would stand still, glancing around for some clue as to what he had been doing until Philza would call out some single word to spur his memory, “planks,” or “barn,” or “bucket,” and Ranboo would perk up as his mind caught up again. It seemed exhausting. Ranboo flexed his hand out, spreading his fingers wide and then curled them back into a fist. The grey color had left his fingertips. His white hand was a reddish purple around his nails, but his black hand was too dark to show color under the pigment. He shifted his feet and rolled his shoulders forward.

“That’s the blood comin’ back,” Techno said. “Doesn’t feel great.” Ranboo shifted uncomfortably where he sat. “Maybe you should start wearin’ something warmer to bed.... shoes, at least.”

“Not a bad idea,” Ranboo said, huffing out a short laugh. “Or deadlock the door.”

“Nah, Philza’d never go for that. Safety hazard. He already hates that I let the fire go overnight, but he’s got those wings to keep him warm. The rest of us aren’t so lucky.”

“It does get cold over there,” Ranboo said softly, before looking up at Techno. “Don’t tell him I said that...” Techno laughed at how far Ranboo went to avoid complaining.

“I don’t think he’d mind, kid. I think we’ve got another redstone heater somewhere. We use ‘em in the barns during storms. I can bring it over.”

“I don’t want to be any more trouble,” Ranboo said, shaking his head. It seemed Techno would have to be more strategic in offering help to the kid. He was near obsessive over taking up as little effort and space as possible.

“You won’t be much help if you’re freezin’ to death at night. I need you on the beet farm with me, that thing won’t build itself. I like havin’ you as an extra hand.” Ranboo looked over to him, a look of surprise on his face. “What?”

“Nothing. Sorry.” He looked back to the fire, shaking his head. Techno waited, continuing to watch him. The kid needed to learn to speak his mind. One of Techno’s (many) pet peeves was trying to guess what people were thinking. Ranboo looked back over, catching his gaze, and Techno raised his eyebrows at him. The kid swallowed, darting his eyes away and back before speaking. “I- I just. I didn’t think you liked me,” he admitted. *Oh*. “I mean– not that I thought you *hated* me or something, or I- I hope you don’t, I, um–” he stumbled over his words a bit. He took a second to gather himself. “I’m glad I can be... helpful. It’s... well, it’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t hate you, Ranboo.” Ranboo looked up, and Techno met his gaze. The kid had gotten slowly more comfortable making eye contact, even if it was brief. He sighed.

He hadn't given Ranboo much reason to think he *didn't* hate him, did he? After not speaking to him for the better part of a week, he now only bothered to interact with him when he needed something, or when the two were forced into the same space for some extended period of time. Even now, this conversation was only taking place because Philza wasn't awake and Techno would feel too guilty to go get him. And he'd feel a bit too much like a monster to leave a child standing in a trance in the snow. But he didn't *hate* the kid...

"Look, Ranboo... Phil and I, we worked hard to get to this place. To be... settled. And safe. Strangers tend to be bad news more often than not, and the last strangers I met tried pretty hard to kill me, so... yeah. I didn't trust you." Ranboo listened silently, a look of concern passing over his face when Techno mentioned his most recent run in. The Butcher Army hadn't been a fun experience for him. He didn't like to think about it often. But Ranboo didn't pry, which Techno appreciated. "Nothing against *you*, though. You..." Techno paused. "You're alright."

The statement seemed to relieve Ranboo of some of the tension he seemed to constantly hold coiled in his body. His ears were less pinned back, shoulders lower, eyes darting just slightly less.

"Thank you," he said. He had to wonder where the kid learned such good manners. Someone had taught him, that much was clear. He differed from Techno in that aspect. Technoblade didn't have much of a concept of what was polite and what was rude. He spoke his mind without much thought toward that. Ranboo shifted his feet again, flexing his fingers around the mug before taking another sip of water.

"Still sore?" Techno asked. Ranboo hummed.

"Not as bad," he said, looking down at his hands. He held his white hand out flat with the palm facing down, inspecting his fingers.

Techno was still taken off guard sometimes observing Ranboo's appearance, how long his appendages were, his fingers thin and delicate. In theory, Ranboo should have been a fairly terrifying creature. Every aspect of his appearance lent itself to a nightmarish conjuration, bizarrely colored, inhuman in his noises, sharp nails. His height should have made him intimidating, his eyes a warning. At one point, when he spoke, Techno had noted that his

teeth were sharp and pointed starting at his canines and going back, difficult to spot if you weren't looking but certainly one of his more menacing traits. In theory, Ranboo should have been threatening. Instead, he held himself so specifically, in such a precise way that it negated all of those traits. He made himself small, his face neutral, his eyes soft. Docile.

He looked kind. He reminded Techno of Philza in that way. Techno began to feel another pang of guilt at having shunned the kid for so long. Phil was right; Ranboo had given them no reason not to trust him. In fact, he'd already had a chance to wreak some havoc if he had intended to. He'd been alone with Phil and Techno both.

Ranboo was watching him. Techno realized he had been staring. He shook himself slightly, breaking himself away from his thoughts.

"Oh," he said. "I, uh, I grabbed your book from Phil's place," he said, turning to pick the notebook up from the table behind him. He handed it to Ranboo. When the kid took it, he held it tightly in his hands. "I didn't read it." Ranboo nodded. "You can, uh, you can stay here for the night. If you start feelin' sick or something from the cold, you can come get me instead of wakin' up Phil. I doubt I'll get sleep tonight anyway."

"Okay," Ranboo said. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Techno said. He put another log on the fire, nudging it around to make sure the flame would stay high. "There's more wood by the door if the fire dies down." Ranboo nodded again. "And uh, there's another blanket in that cabinet over there," he nodded his head to the cabinet that stood next to the bookshelf.

"Thank you, Technoblade," Ranboo said. "Really. Thank you." Techno looked over at him, letting out a sigh.

"Get some sleep."

On his way back to the stairs up to his room, he stopped at the bookshelf, pulling out *A Terrible Fortress* before turning to walk up the stairs. As he did, he looked back to Ranboo, who had opened his memory book and was writing hurriedly on a fresh page. Techno went to bed.

Silk Touch

Chapter Summary

“Ranboo?” Philza’s voice brought him back to the present, like it always did. He felt shame.

“I still don’t remember,” he said, an admittance of defeat. Phil tutted at him.

“I mean, I wasn’t really expecting you to,” he said, shrugging. Ranboo looked up, a bit surprised at the response. “These kinds of things don’t really work like fairy tales, Ranboo. There’s not gonna be a secret key to unlock the door.” Ranboo let out his breath, his ears pulled back. “That doesn’t mean we won’t find a way in, though. And look, this is a step forward, right? We know more now than we’ve known for a long while.”

“So it makes the soil better?” Ranboo asked. Philza deposited a small trowel into his hand. The handle was wood, fairly worn, and rust had begun to build up at the base.

“Yeah, simply put,” Phil said. He dropped two wooden buckets at the edge of the potato farm. “Harvest the potatoes, replace them with carrots. Eventually when the beet farm is ready to harvest, we’ll put the carrots there and the beets where the potatoes are, and so on.” He knelt down next to the farm and stuck his spade into the soil next to a tuft of green.

“A while we first started gettin’ settled here, we lost a whole potato crop to wireworms,” Techno added. He was nailing the final planks to the irrigation system of the beet farm.

“Oh. That’s not good,” Ranboo said. Philza chuckled.

“Yeah, carrot stew got old pretty fast. But the villagers to the east of here showed us good farming practices, the northern village had good trades for resources, so we managed.” Ranboo nodded.

“What should I, uh...” He held his trowel in both hands, unsure of where to start.

“Just dig up the whole potato root, brush the dirt off into this bucket, and then put the potatoes into that one,” Phil said, demonstrating as he explained. He dug the trowel deep under the plant, uprooting the whole thing. The soil fell off easily into the bucket, and he threw the potato into the other one where it landed with a hollow thud. “We’ll plant the carrots when the whole plot is ready.”

Ranboo nodded. It seemed hard to mess up. Philza had learned over the few weeks Ranboo had been helping out with these tasks that Ranboo was a visual learner. Holding onto instructions in his head had proven to be a difficult task, the order of things getting jumbled with no distinct memory to hold onto other than the words said to him. When things were demonstrated, he could keep them in his memory far more easily. He always tended to work fairly silently, falling into a rhythm of work, a pattern of movements that kept him on track. Still, he enjoyed it when Phil and Techno were working alongside him. Techno alone was a pretty silent person, but with Philza there they often traded quips or made plans. Philza often updated Techno on the latest gossip from the villages, and Ranboo enjoyed listening idly to the stories Phil told. He wanted to go to one of those villages someday. He wondered if Philza would be willing to take him on one of his trading outings.

This was one of those tasks where it was easy to fall into a steady rhythm of work. Dig, dust, deposit, repeat. He found after a few passes uprooting the plants that it was far easier to use his hands than to use the shovel Phil had given him. His clawed fingers cut easily into the dirt, long fingers able to pull up the whole root from underneath in one motion. When he went to shake the dirt off, all it took was a release of tension in his fingers that held the dirt tightly packed around the potatoes and the soil fell away almost immediately. Philza had given him gloves when they started, but he felt too clumsy in them, unable to feel exactly what he was doing. It wasn’t a terribly cold day, and the sun was out as well, so he went without them, pausing every once in a while to breath warm air into his palms or rub his hands together.

Things had been surprisingly normal. Ranboo didn’t quite know what he had expected, perhaps some strange tension, an unexpected danger, something going wrong. Every so often, he would find himself looking over his shoulder, peering through the windows, checking the edge of the woods for *something*. He didn’t know what. In his memory book, he read the recollection of the moments before he was found every night; *you were running from something. you can’t let it catch you. don’t let your guard down*. He didn’t remember writing this, but each time he went over those words, he felt a tug of fear in his chest. In the dark, alone, with Philza already fast asleep upstairs, he would read, and he would feel fear.

It struck a very particular dread into his mind when he would wake in the morning and find words he had no recollection of writing, words that hadn't been there the night before but were there now, words written into margins of other past pages, hidden between other lines, scribbled frantically over other pages of writing.

it is trying to speak to you again.

the ghost has asked for this book.

do not tell them. they won't see.

the dream lies.

He didn't know what they meant. He wondered if he wrote them while sleeping. Techno had found him sleepwalking that one night, and a few times he'd woken up standing in front of a window looking out at the snow or sitting in front of the fire. But these strange wakings, much like his wreck of a memory, didn't feel unfamiliar, clearly something he had dealt with before.

At the very least, he felt comforted that he wasn't the only one in this homestead with odd quirks. Philza had noted them as hybrid traits, actions or behaviors that he and Techno did instinctually. Philza didn't sit still for very often, constantly adjusting his posture or position, fluffing out his wings so the feathers rustled. When it was sunny, he would sit outside on his porch with his wings spread wide to soak in the warmth, but at night he kept the house as dark as possible, extinguishing all lanterns but the one he left on for Ranboo. He had said it was comforting for the darkness of the night to be so dense, it always had been.

Techno's traits were similarly instinctual, though he would never admit them himself. Philza pointed them out every so often. He had a tendency to make collections, storing things away for future use just on the off chance they would be useful, and was particularly drawn to gold artifacts. He didn't like his things touched. He was easily spurred into action, jumping at the opportunity to cut down mobs, and especially protective of his home. He often had a sixth sense for danger.

While Techno wouldn't acknowledge hybrid traits in himself, he certainly pointed them out when he noticed them in Ranboo. It was difficult to tell exactly what could be attributed to Ranboo's origin and what could be attributed to his admittedly strange personality, but Ranboo would often find Techno studying his behaviors with a close eye. He would note when Ranboo made a slightly new vocalization, or when he'd stop dead in his tracks to look up at the moon, or when he picked things up from Philza's house, a decoration or a pillow or a plate from the kitchen, just to hold it in his hands for a time before placing it back down somewhere else.

This was turning into one of those times when Techno observed him closely. As Ranboo worked, he became slowly more and more aware that Techno was watching him more and more. He continued to work, unsure of whether or not he should address the man's gaze. If Philza had noticed his growing interest, he didn't show it, continuing to talk through his plan to insulate the shed that sat behind the barns. Eventually, just as Ranboo had finished uprooting a potato plant, Techno interrupted.

"Stop," he said. The command was said with such force that Ranboo immediately froze, pinning his ears back. Philza was effectively silenced as well, turning his full attention to Techno.

"What?" He asked, confused at the interjection.

"Not you," Techno said. He stood, setting the hammer aside and brushing his hands on his pants. "How're you doin' that?" He asked, directing the question to Ranboo. Philza turned his attention to him as well, and Ranboo felt very suddenly scrutinized.

"Doing what?" he asked.

"Oh, that is odd, isn't it?" Phil murmured quietly.

"With your hands," Techno said. He crossed the distance between the two plots, crossing his arms as he came closer. Ranboo looked down. He was doing what he had been doing the whole time, scooping dirt and potatoes up with his fingers. He didn't see anything strange about it. It was a handful of dirt.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking back up at the two of them.

“It’s— the way you’re holding it, it’s all... held together,” Techno said. He made a gesture with his hands like he was making a snowball. Ranboo looked back down.

“It’s dirt...” he said, entirely unsure of what Techno was trying to say. “I’m just holding dirt.” He looked to Philza for some hope of clarification.

“No, he’s right, mate,” Phil said. “Look.” Phil knelt, digging his hands into the dirt under the next potato plant in the row. When he brought the root up out of the soil, it was messy, falling apart in his hands. One of the potatoes fell out of his grasp, and chunks of soil slipped through his fingers to the ground below. Ranboo looked down at his own handful, neatly contained and held together such that not even a particle of dirt seemed to escape.

“Oh,” Ranboo said. “Is that... bad?” Techno didn’t answer that question.

“Now do the next thing,” he demanded instead. “Put the soil in the bucket.” Ranboo felt like he was being tested for something, but he had no idea what it was. He went through the movements that he had been performing the whole time he was working, bringing his handful of soil and potatoes over to the first wooden bucket. When he had his hands over the brim, he opened his fingers a bit, letting the tension out, and the soil fell from the plant in one smooth motion. The potatoes were caught by his fingers, strained out from the dirt until they were all that was left. He wasn’t sure what Techno wanted him to do next, so he held the potatoes out like a trophy for him and Philza to observe. Techno just stared.

“Definitely strange,” Phil said, taking one of the potatoes from Ranboo’s hands.

“Do it again,” Techno said.

“Tech, you’re being weird,” Philza muttered, giving him a look.

“Humor me,” Techno said before turning his attention back to Ranboo. “Again?” He asked nicer this time.

It felt a bit less like an interrogation this time, but he still squirmed a bit under the inspection. Ranboo obliged, performing the same task again. Dig, dust, deposit. When he finished, he looked up at Technoblade for some further instruction.

“Look at the hole, too,” Techno said. Ranboo looked and found that it was also neatly dug out. He was beginning to see why Techno was intrigued by this. The soil looked like it had been removed by some tool, a hole with smooth edges that didn’t crumble or fall in on themselves. But still... it was just dirt.

“Yeah, it’s interesting,” Phil said, “But why are you so worked up? It’s probably just another hybrid thing.”

“*Exactly*,” Techno said. A smile began growing on his face, born of excitement. It was a bit of an odd sight. Techno smiled when he found something amusing, and that was about it. If Ranboo hadn’t known him well enough, he’d be a bit put off by the expression. Now, though, it was almost exciting to see the man so enthusiastic about something. He turned to Phil. “I know what he is.” Ranboo perked up at this, his ears drawing forward.

“What?” he asked, and Philza asked the same, their voices overlapping. Techno immediately turned and started walking back toward the cabins. Ranboo scrambled to his feet, slipping for a moment on the snow before walking hurriedly to catch up. His long stride made it easy, and he hunched behind Techno as he walked as if getting closer would help him understand better. Phil came up behind them, beating his wings slightly to give him a boost.

“I was reading the wrong books,” Techno said as he strode onwards. “I was lookin’ at histories and encyclopedias of mobs, adventurers documentation, all that about the fortresses and monuments, it was the wrong stuff– God, how did I not put it together?”

“Wh–” Ranboo tried to ask, but Techno quickly cut him off.

“Cus of course it was the wrong stuff, I know mobs better than anythin’ else in this world, why did I think I’d just somehow miraculously overlooked something that looked as distinct as you do?” Techno turned to face Ranboo, walking backwards as he talked for a moment before looking forward again. They arrived at the steps up to the porch and Techno took them two at a time, throwing his front door open. Ranboo ducked his head to avoid the doorframe, stepping inside cautiously. Techno was already searching his bookshelf.

“So where—” Ranboo was interrupted once again.

“But that, exactly what you did there, I’ve read about that before. This one!” Techno pulled a book from the shelf. It was clearly old and poorly bound, made from cracked leather with uneven pages. “It’s just a diary, I assumed it was all just meaningless stories, that’s why I forgot about it until now. They’re just nonsense, most of them—” He put the book on his kitchen table, flipping through the pages so quickly that Ranboo was worried he would tear the pages.

“So then—”

“But maybe they’re—”

“ *Techno!*” Philza cut in, speaking louder and more firmly than Ranboo had ever heard him talk before. It made him straighten his posture, though he didn’t know why. Techno stopped talking, looking up from his book to look over at the man. “Skip to the important part, mate.” Techno blinked.

“Right,” he said. He looked down, flipping a few more pages before he stopped at the one he was searching for. “Here.” Ranboo and Philza both came closer to look over his shoulders at the book. Technoblade read the important parts of the passage out loud; “ *A neutral creature, passive unless provoked... tall as a house, darker than midnight, with a gaze so piercing it froze me where I stood; I have seen them before, but never so close—*” he paused, interjecting his own thoughts, “He doesn’t describe it much more than that, but this is the important part—” he pointed to the start of the next paragraph. “ *It wandered aimlessly in the night, darting about, but when it came upon the hill behind my house, it paused for a moment before scooping out a chunk of the earth. It was perfectly carved. Even now it remains, as if this piece of the hill was vanished from existence –* and then he goes on about the Gods for a bit...” Techno turned the page. “Then... here – *it held in its hands this piece of earth, whole,*

unbroken, faultless and unchanged from its source, carried off into the night by this creature's silk touch."

Techno was right; the description matched his action perfectly. But what caught his eye after he turned the page wasn't the account of what this author deemed a *silk touch*, but rather what was on the page opposite this description. It was an illustration, worn out slightly from time but still clear enough. The charcoal drawing depicted a creature Ranboo found familiar, so much so that he couldn't look away from it. Tall, dark, with long fingers and eyes strikingly rendered on the page using negative space. Its limbs were long and thin, ribs and hips protruding in sharp angles, mouth jagged and long like a straight slice cut through its head. It had a tail like his, fingers long like his, eyes piercing like his.

Ranboo's gaze flicked over to the wall of text on the other page. At the bottom, a line which Techno had neglected to read aloud; *when it looked my way, I was frozen, convinced this was where I would die. Even now I recall this with great fear in my heart. This is a creature born of darkness. It does not belong on this plane.*

He felt very suddenly like an alien, a creature, not a person, suddenly unbearably aware of the abnormality of his existence. Still, despite that, in this illustration of this creature, his *origin*, he felt comfort. It was recognizable. He knew that body, that face, the posture it stood with. It should have been scary, a terrifying monster like any other mob, feared by all, wanted by none. But to him, it felt strangely like home.

"Ranboo?" Philza's voice cut into his thoughts, breaking his focus on the image. He hummed, reluctant to pull his gaze from this image. "Does it look familiar?" He nodded. He didn't see it directly, but he could feel that Phil and Techno were sharing a look. He blinked, shifting his focus. Below the drawing were symbols drawn in thin lines that intersect and created shapes on the page, drawn by the same hand as the other entries but not in the same language. As he watched, they seemed to shift and move, becoming almost unreal. He felt dizzy for a moment, wondering absentmindedly if he was dreaming. But as the symbols continued to shift, they became letters, and the letter became a word.

"*Enderman*," Ranboo said quietly, almost involuntarily, as if the word had demanded to be spoken aloud. He glanced up to find Philza and Techno both watching him carefully, curiously. He looked back down. The word remained the same. "That's what this says," he said, pointing to the symbols. It was as if they were foreign and familiar at the same time, existing in both states of being at once. "Enderman," he repeated. The word felt good in his mouth.

“You can read that?” Techno asked. Ranboo nodded. “What about this?” He pointed to the opposite page where there was another set of symbols in the margins.

“*Enchant : Silk touch*,” Ranboo read. “That’s all it says.” Techno flipped a few pages back until he found what he was looking for.

“What about that?” The symbols were written alongside another drawing, this one a landscape with huge stone spires that reached high into the air, and the sky was drawn in dark, swirling strokes. dotted across the landscape were more of the mob of Ranboo’s origin, *endermen*. The letters shifted into place.

“*The End*,” he translated. “*From beyond the portal*.” For some reason, despite having no idea what this place was, he felt comfort from it. He tilted his head, reading the text that ran along the side of the drawing. “*The Totem’s Path*.” Techno blinked at him slowly, and Ranboo met his gaze.

“You’re full of secrets, aren’t you, kid?” he said. Ranboo pulled his ears back, but he could tell it was meant as a compliment rather than a critique. “Enderman, huh...”

“I’ve never seen one,” Philza noted. “But I’ve heard that name before. I think they were around before the End was sealed off.”

“I’ve ever even heard of ‘em,” Techno muttered. He pulled the book toward him, inspecting the drawing of the End more closely before flipping back to the Enderman illustration. He looked up at Ranboo as if comparing the two of them.

“How old is this book?” Phil asked.

“Dunno. It’s only dated with months, not years. It’s old, though, *old* old. I got it from a trade way before I met you, from some villager’s who’s great great grandfather found it in the ruins of some abandoned settlement far south.” Philza raised his eyebrows. “I’m just repeating what I was told.”

“That language is only around in enchantments now,” Phil said, looking over to the page Techno was studying. “It’s not used anymore. It died off after the God War. I don’t know where you could possibly have learned it,” he puzzled, looking back to Ranboo, who looked up at him with a distinctly lost look in his eyes. “You alright, mate?” Ranboo shook his head, trying to organize his thoughts.

“Yeah, I just...” He didn’t know how to answer. Words were being thrown around, words he recognized but couldn’t place, couldn’t connect with any real meaning. *Totem* and *God War* and *End*. It was like the knowledge was trapped under ice, visible, within reach, but somehow unable to be pulled free. Phil and Techno seemed to understand, so why didn’t he? Even then, at the very least, they were all three equally as lost when it came to this strange creature, the Enderman. Ranboo had hoped that upon this discovery of his origin, he would unlock some core memory, that his past would come rushing back in one great flood and with it would come all the answers he had been searching for.

There was nothing.

There was always nothing. Why was there always nothing? The answer was right in front of him and yet his memory remained fragmented, pulverised into little more than particles that floated about and caught the light every so often, just for long enough for him to see glimpses of something there, of something *familiar*, and then they were gone. He wanted to gather them together into something he could hold, like the dirt from the farm; intact.

There was nothing.

“Ranboo?” Philza’s voice brought him back to the present, like it always did. He felt shame.

“I still don’t remember,” he said, an admittance of defeat. Phil tutted at him.

“I mean, I wasn’t really expecting you to,” he said, shrugging. Ranboo looked up, a bit surprised at the response. “These kinds of things don’t really work like fairy tales, Ranboo. There’s not gonna be a secret key to unlock the door.” Ranboo let out his breath, his ears pulled back. “That doesn’t mean we won’t find a way in, though. And look, this is a step forward, right? We know more now than we’ve known for a long while.”

“And if you can read the Enchanter’s language, we might be able to know even more real soon,” Techno added. “I’ve got a whole stack of books I’ve never been able to read before.”

“The fact that you’re here means there must still be a mob of Endermen somewhere,” Phil said, perking up a bit at the thought. “You came from somewhere. Hybrids don’t just materialize out of nothing, they have to have an origin mob. So somewhere, you’ve got family.”

Phil said it with such hope in his voice that Ranboo couldn’t help but let himself relax, comforted by the idea that there could be someone who knew him, who knew who he was. Somewhere, there were creatures like him. There had to be.

Technoblade had already made his way back over to his bookshelf, loading his arms up with a stack of books, papers, scrolls and parchments folded over and yellowed with time. He set them on the table in front of them, catching one of the parchment rolls before it fell off the table and placing it leaned up against the books so it wouldn’t fall. He looked at Ranboo.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited to translate these,” he said, a smile tugging at his mouth. Ranboo’s eyes widened with intrigue, excited by the thought of decoding some hidden knowledge. Philza chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’ll finish the farming on my own then, I suppose,” he said, turning towards the door.

“Oh, no, I can—” Ranboo started, but Phil cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“We’ve only got the two rows left. You stay here. I don’t think Techno’d let you leave anyhow.” Techno had started flipping through pages, laying out a paper and charcoal on the table. “But you two are in charge of dinner. I’m not doing all the work.” Ranboo nodded.

“We’ll handle dinner,” Ranboo said. “Thank you.” Phil smiled at him, and there was a look in his eye that Ranboo couldn’t quite place. Recognition, perhaps, or nostalgia. Before he could identify it, Phil had turned, securing his hat before opening the front door to a gust of wind.

Ranboo turned back to the table, where Techno had opened up one of the larger tomes, a thick leather book plated on the spine with metal decoration. Even from a distance, he could see the symbols on the page begin to swirl and change shape like moving water.

“You read, I’ll write?” Techno said. At some point while Phil was leaving, he had donned a pair of gold rimmed glasses, leaning over the table with one hand braced on the parchment and the thin stick of charcoal already gripped in the other.

They had a lot of work ahead of them, but Ranboo didn’t mind. In fact, he felt excited, curious to learn some hidden secrets of this world, to uncover some truth that had been left in the past. These were memories that were almost left forgotten, now dredged up to the surface by an unexpected twist of fate.

Like something had placed him here for a reason.

And Red

Chapter Summary

He couldn't move. Its breath burnt cold at his shoulder, coming into sight at the corner of his eye and moving slowly into his peripheral vision, but he couldn't turn his gaze to it. It leaned close to his face.

"Look at me."

He did.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Every time Ranboo blissfully forgot how significant his height was, the world around him found a way to remind him in the most humiliating ways. As soon as his skull thudded against the ceiling of Philza's kitchen he felt his cheeks go red, hunching his shoulders down and looking up at the wooden boards overhead as though he hadn't expected them to be there. Phil stifled a laugh, though not well enough for Ranboo not to notice. He sighed and rubbed the back of his head with one hand, wincing as the ache began to fade.

"Sorry, mate," Phil said. "If I could raise the ceilings, I would." Ranboo looked over at him and raised his eyebrows. "No, you're right, I wouldn't. Too much work." He huffed out a laugh.

"It's alright. I'm just excited to have a bed that fits me," Ranboo said. He brought the box of nails he had been sent to retrieve from the counter back over to Phil. "Here you go," he said. Phil took them from his hand and pulled one out.

"Sorry we couldn't have started on it sooner," he said. "Had to make sure the beet farm got done in time for planting, though." Ranboo nodded. Phil held a nail up to the boards he was lining up, gauging to see how far through they would go.

The two of them were situated in Philza's living room, the furniture pushed back against the walls and out of the way. In the center of the room was the current project, the base pieces for

a bedframe intended to go into Phil's storage room on the first floor. Once they had finished the beet farm, Phil had immediately pulled out building schematics for the bed, which he had apparently been planning for a while now. It had come as a surprise to Ranboo, who was perfectly content to continue sleeping on the couch, but Phil insisted that the old sofa was far too lumpy and far too small, and try as he might, Ranboo couldn't convince the man to let him take up as little space as possible any longer.

"Of course," Ranboo responded. With the added help from Ranboo, they'd finished the beet farm several days before they actually needed to do the final crop rotation, so at the very least Ranboo didn't feel terrible for taking up time better used prepping the farms. "The couch is actually pretty comfortable, you know."

"You've got low standards," Phil said. Ranboo shrugged. "These will work better," Phil said, setting the box of nails down next to him. "This part's pretty straightforward, just make sure the pieces are flush here at the top of this board." Phil lined up a nail against the side of one plank, tapping it a few times to nestle it into the wood. "Make sure you pull this piece towards you." He sunk the nail in three hits with a confidence behind his strike that Ranboo still lacked. Phil held out the hammer to him, and he took it gingerly. "It's the same thing the whole way down the siding."

Ranboo nodded as Phil stood. He looked over, examining the schematics Phil had drawn up. He was quickly learning how Phil drew out designs, puzzling out how they translated into physical space. It had looked overwhelming at first, a series of parts and measurements that were scattered across the pages, slowly coming together somehow into a finished piece. This time, unlike with the beet farm, Phil walked him through not only the process of building but also the rationale behind it and how it was notated on paper. He was slowly recognizing the different markings for where pieces lined up, how they were secured, which parts had to be built first and which last. It was still a bit difficult to see the final piece, but it was becoming clearer. Even from when they started to now, Ranboo was beginning to identify the lattice base that a mattress would rest on, even if it was only half of the build.

"Makes sense?" Phil asked, glancing at the build plans as well. "It's gotta be split like this so we can add the extra legs in the middle," he said, pointing to the supporting structure in the center of the base. Since the bed was longer than Phil or Techno's, he wanted to make it more sturdy in the middle just in case.

"Yeah," Ranboo said, tilting his head at the design. "And then this symbol means it lines up with the top edge?"

“Yep! Flush top is that one, and then...” he searched the page. “That one’s center, and that one’s flush bottom.” Ranboo nodded trying to retain as much information as possible. He repeated the meanings in his head, *flush top, center, flush bottom*, tracing the markings with his eyes before he looked away. He wondered if this would become something he remembered without any effort, like the language of the Enchanters, if it would come fluently just like speaking. He hoped so.

It had been an odd feeling to read a language he didn’t know he knew. When he read, it felt almost like he was playing catchup with himself, reading the words aloud to Techno at exactly the same time that he processed them himself. He wondered if it was possible for him to read before he knew what he was reading, speaking words without consciously speaking them.

It seemed as he read that a lot of this was already well known to Techno. He read about the history of the world they inhabited, about a time before this landscape had become so sparsely populated, so harshly uninhabitable. Techno would listen, charcoal hovering over his paper waiting for some morsel of new information to arise from Ranboo’s translation. Every so often, he would stop and ask a question – *read that again, or is that really what it says, or how’s that spelled?* Ranboo just sputtered at that last one, unsure what kind of answer Techno wanted before just pointing to the word in question. Techno had looked over and breathed a short “ah,” realizing that Ranboo had no idea how to convert these symbols into compatible words with the common tongue. He settled instead for writing it down phonetically.

This all felt familiar, much like everything else in this world, knowledge that had been stowed away for some reason but not entirely destroyed. In reading, he was able to recall the history he had once known, placing events in a chronology as the reminders arose. The books in the Enchanting language were written, according to Techno, from *before*. The word was meaningless without context, but it began to make sense.

The history of this world was separated into three distinct pieces; before, during, and after. The pivotal event at the center of that timeline was the God War. It was a catastrophe in every account, the clashing of unmatched powers. The Enchanters wrote of the Totem God of Undying, a being that set time into motion. They called it a giver of life, a balancer, a peace keeper. They wrote of miracles, sick children brought back from the brink of death, fields of crops revived after being swarmed by pests, and even an entire city that had been washed away by a flood being restored in its entirety after the waters had gone.

Techno wrote down the story of the city. He hadn't heard that one before.

The Enchanters wrote of an emergence of chaos, too. Kings who waged wars at the drop of a hat, scholars who burnt down their libraries overnight, healers who set loose plagues that wiped out whole nations. They wrote of whispers, voices that drove people mad, that taunted the Totem God and sought power over all else. They spoke with voices like cracking glass.

Techno wrote down the names of the mad kings.

The voices came from the Void. They were the remnants of souls once banished by the Totem God and whittled away by timeless torment until all that remained was a primal craving for pandemonium. They were withered, colorless, with wide smiles painted across their faces, smiles that haunted those under their control.

Techno wrote down the words *banished souls*.

They were called Dreamons.

Techno didn't write that down.

When Ranboo had read the word aloud, he paused. He didn't know why. If Techno had noticed, he hadn't said anything. Reading this felt forbidden. It felt like something he shouldn't have known or shouldn't have remembered.

He didn't have much time to think about that, though. As they finished the account that described the Dreamons, Techno was already flipping open the cover of the next book, sliding it in front of Ranboo.

Some of the books were fairly useless. There was a collection of recipes for enchanted potions that were now impossible to make, two books full of trade accounts, and a detailed record of all of the patients of a court physician. Techno was disappointed when they came

across these, but even he had to admit it was unrealistic to expect them all to contain hidden secrets.

The most intriguing of all of the texts they had read was one entitled *The End* . It seemed to be full of field notes from a researcher living in that plane of the world, documenting each and every rock, plant, and organism he came across. At first, it was boring reading about the porous texture of End Stone or the bitter fruit of the chorus plant, but every so often there were accounts of mobs Techno had never heard of before. The book went over detailed anatomy of creatures; Shulkers, hard-shelled and hostile towards outsiders; Endermites, tiny black specks with a nasty bite; Elytra, terrifyingly large beetles with huge, shiny wings. The account of Endermen had both of them hanging off of every word.

The description matched what they had seen in the illustration, with dark purple and black skin, piercing eyes, and long, skeletal limbs. This account had significantly more, though. They had 14 pairs of ribs, a bite that could cut through bone, and a jaw that could be unhinged to amplify their cry.

“Can you do that?” Techno had asked him, and Ranboo cringed at the thought.

“I hope not...”

They read further. Endermen were aggravated by eye contact, making them difficult to observe even from a distance, but unlike the other creatures, they could be observed in every plane, finding their origins in the End but able to inhabit and spawn in the Overworld and in the Nether. When they traveled, they didn’t walk, instead moving in and out of the Void to teleport from place to place. When they were provoked, and particularly when they were injured, they would vanish in a haze of purple smoke.

“Can you do *that*?” Techno had asked, glancing up at Ranboo over the top of his glasses.

“Doubt it,” Ranboo answered, furrowing his brow. “ *They teleport upon contact with water,* ” he read. “I’ve stood barefoot in the snow. Twice. Teleporting would have made that a much less painful experience.” Techno looked sympathetic.

“Maybe snow doesn’t count. You could test it. Go for a swim,” he joked. Ranboo rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, I’ll try that. We’ll be sure to tell Phil it was *your* idea.” Techno smirked.

The life force of the Enderman was it’s pearl. It was the soul, the power behind it’s miraculous ability to transport itself in and out of the Void. When an Enderman died, the pearl would be left behind amid the ashes of the corpse. In the hands of a human, it allowed the holder to harness that power, but only once. It was a dangerous power to wield. The Void was not kind to the minds of men.

Now, in Philza’s living room, Ranboo recalled this and placed a hand over his chest, wondering if he had a pearl inside of him, too. He wondered how many of those Enderman traits he had inherited. He had the tail, the claws, the sharpened teeth. Water burned him. He had the vocalizations, the aversion to eye contact, the silk touch... did that mean he also had the pearl? Did that mean he could travel into the Void? Did he want to?

“Catch!” Phil’s voice broke him out of his thoughts abruptly, and he jerked his head up in time to catch a face full of fabric. Blindly, he put the hammer he was holding down on the ground and pulled the cloth off of his head, shaking his hair out of his eyes as he did. Philza was smiling at him from the doorway of his storage room. “I said *catch* .”

“I heard you,” Ranboo mumbled grumpily.

“Gotta work on those reflexes, mate.” Ranboo dropped the nail he had been moments from sinking into the board in front of him and shook out the item Phil had thrown at him. It was a long sleeved shirt woven from dark brown fibers. “Try it on,” Phil said. “I never wear it anymore, but if it fits you I won’t get rid of it.”

Ranboo pulled it on overtop of the shirt he already wore, also one of Phil’s old pieces. As he slid his arm through the sleeve, he could already predict the result of this endeavour. When all was said and done, the shirt was miserably short in the arms, the cuffs resting only halfway down his forearms. The bottom hem of the shirt reached halfway down his torso. He looked like he was wearing a child’s clothing. Phil narrowed his eyes.

“Huh,” he said. “Forgot about that.” Ranboo pulled the shirt off quickly, embarrassed at how poorly it had fit. “Oh! Wait!” Phil disappeared back into the storage room. Ranboo could hear the sound of boxes being shifted and chests opened as Phil rummaged around. After a moment, he emerged with another item of clothing, this one multicolored and bulky. “Catch,” he said again.

Ranboo stuck both hands out in front of him, palms out and fingers splayed wide, ready to make contact with the fabric. He caught it before it hit his head this time. Philza nodded with mock pride, and Ranboo huffed as he unfolded the new piece, a soft knitted sweater with thick stripes of different colors. He could tell the sleeves were long and floppy. To his surprise as he tried it on, they stopped right at his wrists, and the body of the sweater was almost *long* on him.

“How did this ever fit you?” He asked incredulously, picking a piece of fluff off of the right cuff.

“It didn’t,” Phil laughed. “I read the pattern wrong. *Very* wrong.”

“I can tell,” Ranboo said, and then blinked. “Sorry. That was rude.” But Philza was having a laugh about it, and his smile made Ranboo relax. “It’s very soft,” he noted. He pulled it off over his head, folding it neatly and placing it on the arm of the couch beside him. Philza walked over to retrieve the other shirt from Ranboo’s lap.

“I’m much better at knitting now, I promise. I’ll make you something. How do you feel about hats?” Ranboo looked up.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said, “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Ranboo.” Phil spoke with a sudden seriousness that took him off guard. He straightened his back, unsure what to anticipate. “How do you feel about *hats*. ” Ranboo looked at him blankly, swallowing hard. Phil raised his eyebrows.

“Uh,” he shook himself slightly, “They... they’re alright?”

“Wonderful,” Phil smiled, turning back to walk toward the closet. “I’ll have to think of a good color.” He disappeared into the room but continued to speak. “What if I made it black and white? To match the whole...” Phil popped his head back through the door, waving a hand in a general gesture to Ranboo’s whole personhood.

Ranboo couldn’t help but laugh, a grin growing on his face as he did. Phil’s eyes lit up at the sight, and Ranboo felt his cheeks grow warm. He shook his head, looking back down to the construction project and picking up his hammer again.

“You’re right, that’s a bit much, isn’t it?” Phil hummed to himself as he went back to his task of organizing.

Phil liked to talk while he worked, frequently spouting out every thought that came into his head and following one idea to the next in a bizarre sort of monologue. Ranboo found it comforting, constantly aware he wasn’t alone. It quieted his own thoughts, like Phil’s ramblings took up enough mental energy for the both of them.

Phil organized as Ranboo built. He brought out crates with tinkling glass bottles full of ingredients Ranboo could never name, rolls of parchment, thick tanned leather, and skeins of yarn. When he found things he thought Technoblade might like, he brought them out to the kitchen table which was accumulating a leaning stack of books and papers as well as a few hunks of different ores, a geode with a chunk missing, and a small flask of some sparkling, thick red liquid. Ranboo didn’t ask what it was. Phil bustled about from the storage room to the cellar, checking in on the build every few trips. Ranboo finished the lattice base for the bottom of the frame, moving on to the legs of the bed next. Phil showed him how to carve the wood, skinning off strips with the sharpened edge of a chisel. He made it look much easier than it was.

The first one Ranboo tried came out crooked and lumpy, too narrow at the base to properly hold weight. He had been worried about wasting materials for nothing, but Phil assured him it could easily be used for firewood. He didn’t know if that made it better or worse. But he tried again nonetheless, and while it took him significantly longer than Phil, the next attempt came out shockingly functional. Maybe Phil was right; maybe he was a fast learner.

He sat at the kitchen table, bent over the project. As Phil passed by, he would note advice on Ranboo's grip or his angle or his movements, and Ranboo would adjust as best he could. As he reached the end of his third successfully carved leg, lining up the last few cuts of the chisel as precisely as possible to smooth out the sides, he was interrupted by a very sudden slam of the front door.

He jumped to his feet before he knew what it was, his chair sliding back behind him with the force, gripping the chisel with a white-knuckle grip.

Technoblade met his gaze, standing in the doorframe in dense armor that was coated in thick red dust that also smudged over his hands and face. They stared dumbly at each other for a few moments before Techno blinked, letting an overflowing pack slide from his shoulder and thud to the floor.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and Ranboo let the tension fall from his shoulders. He opened his mouth to speak but was promptly cut off by Philza's voice growing louder as he emerged from the cellar stairs.

"How many bloody times," he emerged and stepped into the living room, "have I told you not to kick open my door?" Techno had already begun undoing the straps of his chestplate where they met at the sides of his ribcage.

"I brought you crimson roots," Techno said. He tugged off his helmet. Where the metal had covered his hair, there was a stark difference between clean forehead and dust coated brow. Phil crossed his arms.

"Did you get netherwart?" He asked.

"*Did I get netherwart,*" Techno scoffed. Phil rolled his eyes and walked over to Techno's pack where it lay leaned up against the bookshelf by the door. He patted off the red dust from the top flap before opening it and digging through to examine the contents. Ranboo lowered the chisel in his hand and placed it silently back onto the table. "You started the bed," Techno said, not quite a question but more of a statement.

“Yes,” Ranboo said, nodding. His tail flicked behind him, releasing some tension from being startled. Techno walked over to the table where Ranboo stood, thudding his helmet down before pulling a chair to him and sitting down with a groan. He leaned against the chair, letting his head fall back and his eyes close. Ranboo noticed a feather sticking out from the shoulder of his armor and realized with a start that it was an arrow.

“You’ve got a, um...” Techno looked over to him. Ranboo gestured. “In your shoulder.” Techno tilted his head awkwardly to examine the spot in question and let out a soft “oh” when he spotted the object in question. Without a second thought, he wrapped his hand around it and yanked it free. The tip was red.

“Ow,” he muttered, examining the arrow with a bizarre look of annoyance on his face. He put it on the table and continued removing his armor.

Ranboo looked over to Philza for any semblance of a reaction to the man’s casual reaction to having been pierced by the projectile, but Phil was knelt down pulling red mushrooms from Techno’s bag. Ranboo thought for a moment before walking over to the chest by the door and pulling out a roll of gauze, which he held out to Techno timidly. Techno looked up at him, having to crane his neck from where he sat.

“Thanks,” he said. He took the gauze and shoved it under his shirt, pressing it against his shoulder with little care for being gentle. “There’s a new Ghast in the valley by the lower bastion,” he said, the comment directed at Phil.

“Oh?” Phil said, popping his head up.

“One guess as to how I found that out,” Techno muttered. He pried his boots off. The metal pieces clacked against each other. Ranboo waited to hear Phil’s guess, but he only chuckled, shaking his head.

“How...” Ranboo began to ask, and Techno looked up at him again. He swallowed. “How did you find out?” Techno laughed, pulling off his other boot.

“Have you ever seen a Ghast?” Ranboo pulled his ears back. “I’m not makin’ fun of you. Seriously, have you been to the nether?” After a pause, Techno added, “Do you remember?” It was an unfortunate thing to be reminded of, and yet...

“No,” Ranboo said. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Techno hummed. He undid the buckles at the side of his leggings. “Ghasts shoot balls of fire that explode when they hit something,” Techno said.

“Ah,” Ranboo said. “So it blew you up.” Phil snorted, and Techno glowered at him.

“Somethin’ like that,” he muttered. He moved to stand and Ranboo stepped back to give him more space as he shimmied off his leggings and nudged them to the side. He stood there for a moment and rolled his shoulders, shaking out one leg so his pants would untwist around the ankle before walking stiffly to the kitchen sink.

“Seems like you made it out alright,” Phil said. He had grabbed a crate to begin loading up the mushrooms, what Ranboo assumed was the netherwart he had mentioned. Techno shrugged, pumping water from the sink well into a bucket. When it was full, he snagged a rag from the countertop and returned to the table, setting the bucket on top of the surface and sitting down again. He put his helmet into his lap.

“It was pretty standard, aside from the Ghast. Ran into a few Wither Skeletons in the fortress. There’s a handful of new zombie piglins, though,” Techno said. He dunked the rag into the water and began cleaning the dust off of his armor.

“That’s unfortunate,” Philza tutted.

“Hm. Not much you can do about it when they get that sick.”

Ranboo watched as Techno cleaned his helmet. As the rag passed over the surface, it wiped away the red to reveal a dark metal that was almost black. It was dull, like it absorbed light

rather than bounced it around. Techno would drag the soaked cloth over the helmet, gather as much debris as he could, and then dunk the rag back into the bucket. He plunged his whole hand under the water, squeezing the rag out so it released a cloud of red smoke in the bucket.

He moved rhythmically with practiced movements, a fluid process. He cleaned the metal, drove the cloth beneath the water, pulled it out.

It was a bit hypnotic to watch. Ranboo wondered absentmindedly how many times Techno had gone to the Nether, how long it had taken to refine this process. Techno clearly had experience there, enough to speak so casually about a creature that shoots fire or to pluck an arrow from his shoulder without a second thought.

He continued his work, speaking to Phil as he did. Ranboo wasn't listening, though. He watches the movements.

Clean the metal, soak the cloth, wipe the red away.

The water gurgled each time his hand breached the surface, the ripples only settling for a second before the next plunge, never quite done, water never clean.

Soak the cloth, wipe the red away.

At some point, Ranboo stopped hearing their voices at all, sinking away, nestled among the wind and the water and the sounds of the rhythm.

The water splashed, and stilled, splashed and stilled.

He felt numb.

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1. The first step is to identify the problem. This involves understanding the current situation and what needs to be improved.

2. Next, we need to set clear goals. These should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

3. Once goals are set, we can develop a plan. This plan should outline the steps needed to achieve the goals.

4. Implementation is the next step. This involves putting the plan into action and monitoring progress.

5. Finally, we need to evaluate the results. This involves comparing the actual outcomes with the goals and making adjustments as needed.

[illegible]

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 82) 和 + 八十二
 83) 和 + 八十三
 84) 和 + 八十四
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 86) 和 + 八十六
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 100) 和 + 一百

$$83) \quad \frac{1}{(x^2-8x+1)^2}$$

Hello Ranboo.

There was no more air in the room.

The water stilled, and stayed still, stayed silent, and they were gone, vanished with the air and the light and the warmth and all that was left was him and *it*.

He tasted blood and bile.

It was as though his heart had stopped and he was waiting for his body to collapse under the weight of fear.

Not even a greeting?

He couldn't move. Its breath burnt cold at his shoulder, coming into sight at the corner of his eye and moving slowly into his peripheral vision, but he couldn't turn his gaze to it. It leaned close to his face.

Look at me. He did.

It's eyes were hollow, carved into its head and so empty that darkness leaked from the sockets. A slit was chiseled into its face, upturned at the edges in some mockery of a smile. Ranboo heard static.

Breathe. He did.

Air entered his lungs in a stuttering gasp, and his body seemed to crack back into place. He stepped back.

Dream.

He remembered now, the way this thing had visited him in dreams, the way it made him tremble, made him fear, made him run, made him wake with his heart in his throat. It stood before him now, skin stretched tight over bones that were far too long, fingers sharpened into claws that bent and cracked, ribs that creaked and twisted like old wood.

It's head was disconnected, suspended in the space above his collarbones.

It cast a shadow.

It was too familiar.

You remember me, don't you? I know how you can get sometimes.

It tilted its head. Ranboo swallowed.

Answer . He did.

“Yes.”

Good. I don't like it when you forget me, you know. But you've been writing it down recently, haven't you?

Ranboo nodded before he realized what he was doing. He blinked. The world felt fuzzy around the edges. Tearing his eyes away, finally, he looked around. He was still in Philza's cabin, but it was different. Darker, colder. Empty. The walls shifted and moved and made him dizzy.

Phil and Techno were gone. The chair was empty, the crate of netherward left abandoned by the door. Outside, there was nothing, not even night. The bucket was still there, full of dark red water.

“What is this?” Ranboo asked. His voice felt distant. Dream tilted its head again, and when it did, something in its body cracked. The sound echoed in Ranboo’s head. “I want to wake up.”

You are awake, it said, an eerie happiness behind its voice. Ranboo shook his head.

“No, I was...” He looked back at the bucket. “I was...”

You were what?

“I was...” Ranboo shook his head harder. “Stop,” he said. “Stop it.”

Stop what?

“Stop it! I was—” he had it, for just a moment, and then it was gone, and his mind was blank. “Stop!”

I’m not doing anything, Ranboo .

“You are, you are, you— what are you doing?” He looked up. Dream stared at him. “Please.”

You’re the one who came to visit me, it said. It looked around the room.

“I– I did?”

You don't remember? Why didn't he remember? He brought his hands to his head, pressing his palms into his temples.

“I was...” Dream laughed. It made him flinch.

Come on, now, don't get too worked up. You wanted to talk to me, didn't you? You wanted me here. Ranboo closed his eyes. *You want me here, Ranboo.* He nodded. *Do you remember why?*

“No,” he said.

You know what I am now, it said. *Do you remember?*

“Dreamon,” he said, the word leaving his mouth before he even thought of it. There was a hum of static in his ears. Dream stepped toward him, and when it did, the air felt dense like water. Ranboo stepped back.

That's right, it said. *See? You can remember the important things.* Ranboo nodded. *And that book was pretty important, wasn't it?*

“How did you–”

I know everything you know, Ranboo. You speak Enchanted, that's new. It leaned in. *Full of surprises.* He blinked. Dream leaned back again. *How convenient.*

“Convenient?” Dream didn't answer. It disappeared from in front of him. Ranboo turned, searching for it, before finding it again at the window in the kitchen.

It's dark. The Void. Ranboo stayed silent. He held his hands at his chest. His heart hammered. *It's so dark. So quiet. The Endermen, they could come and go.* Dream's head turned to face him, but its body stayed where it was, faced toward the window. Ranboo swallowed. *I can't.*

Dream seemed to shake for a moment, but only for a moment. Its body turned to face Ranboo, lining up again with its head.

You can.

Dream appeared in front of him, its face so close to Ranboo's that the dark smile was all he could see. He was frozen.

You'll take me with you. Ranboo's mouth was dry. *You'll take me with you, won't you?*

He felt tears at the corners of his eyes, welling up as the static grew louder and louder in his head.

Promise me. He couldn't. He couldn't. He couldn't.

The world began to sway.

You and I, we're the same now.

"Stop," Ranboo said, but his voice was nothing. "Stop." Dream leaned closer. Ranboo squeezed his eyes shut. His cheeks stung. It was so loud and so quiet, everything shattering apart until it was colorless and blank and empty. "Stop, stop, stop, stop it!"

Stop, stop! Dream mocked him, the voice adding to the cacophony of sound growing in his mind. The house shook. The windows began to crack.

skin. It began to sting.

He was forgetting. He could feel himself forgetting. The memories were already sand slipping through his fingers. Dream had spoken to him. It had told him to look, told him to breathe, told him... no. Something.

No.

Something about the Void.

Right?

He looked back up at Phil, who stared back at him for a moment before shaking himself out of his stunned silence. He grabbed a towel from the counter and walked to Ranboo, reaching out and quickly wrapping his hand and arm in the cloth. He was saying something. Ranboo couldn't hear it.

Ranboo just watched him, letting his arm be moved and adjusted to be dried off. It burned when the towel rubbed against his skin, but he was still frozen, his mind trying to catch up to what was going on. The Dreamon, Dream, what did it say?

You can remember the important things.

Something about...

A voice began to break through the barrier.

"Why did you do that?" Phil asked. He unwrapped the towel, wadding it up and dabbing at Ranboo's fingers and palms. Ranboo just stared. "Ranboo?" Phil looked up, trying to meet his eye. He folded the towel over and brought it up slowly, pressing a dry corner to Ranboo's

cheek. Ranboo flinched at the touch and stepped back, finally meeting Phil's gaze. "Hey," Phil said softly.

Behind him, Techno picked up the bucket from the floor and placed it back onto the table.

"Sorry," Ranboo said, almost reflexively. Phil shook his head.

"Don't apologize, mate," he said. He was keeping his voice low, speaking gently. "Are you alright? Do you feel okay?" The last of the ringing left Ranboo's ears, and things were oddly quiet. He looked back down at his hand, then at the water on the floor, then at the empty bucket. He was shaking. Why was he so afraid? What had he done? "Ranboo?" He looked up again.

"Sorry," he said again, and then shook his head. "Sorry." He pressed the palm of his other hand against his eye.

"You're alright," Phil said. "Come sit." Ranboo let himself be led over to the kitchen table. He sunk into the chair. He braced his elbows against his knees and groaned. He felt like he was slowly waking up, still half asleep. His eyes wouldn't stay focused, and he was trying so hard to just *think*, but things were so distant and so strange like he was trying to remember a dream—

He flinched hard, jerking upright. The image of that crooked, haunted smile hung in his mind, carved behind his eyelids. It lingered, blurry, becoming more and more uncertain, an echo of a creature.

It's dark.

Techno was watching him. He was acutely aware of that, the wondering, the curiosity, the concern. The man was silent, but he was watching. Waiting. Ranboo wondered what he looked like from Techno's perspective, and then he slowly became aware of how crazy this truly made him. How freakish.

What was *wrong* with him?

Philza brought over a bandage, along with a familiar jar of burn salve. He wondered if that was why Phil needed Techno to go and get more netherwart. Because of him. He felt a pang of guilt in his chest.

Eventually, this would be too much. He knew it. It was already too much. Everything they'd done for him, a complete stranger. All the supplies he was taking up, the food he was eating, the clothing, the building materials, the time spent dealing with his *issues*.

It's dark.

The words echoed, but he didn't know what they meant. He could hear that voice though, remember it saying the words to him.

"Ranboo."

He looked up. Philza was kneeling in front of him, staring up at him with so much concern in his eyes it made Ranboo's chest ache. He did this. He made them worry.

He was exhausted.

"Sorry," he mumbled miserably. He looked down at his lap, unable to meet Phil's gaze anymore, trying to pull back the sting in his eyes.

"Ranboo, it's alright. I promise. You're alright." Phil rested a hand on his knee. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Techno's hand holding out a mug of water for him. He took a breath, closing his eyes as he did, and let it out slowly, calming the tremor in his chest. He took the mug.

“Did I, um,” he started, but his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and looked over at Techno. “I put my hand in the water, right?” Hearing his own voice brought some clarity, pulled him away from the last bit of weary disorientation.

“Yeah,” Techno said, and Phil nodded as well.

“You don’t remember doing it?” Phil asked. Ranboo shook his head. “Do you remember what happened before?”

He thought about telling them, just for a moment. About his nightmare, the voice, this thing that called itself a Dreamon. It was just a dream. It had to be. There were no more Dreamons.

There were no more Endermen either.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said. The lie felt heavy on his tongue. “I was just watching Techno clean his armor and then, I don’t know. I was...” Phil began to spread the salve over his hand and forearm. It stung at first, but then numbed. Ranboo didn’t finish the thought.

“You’re sure?” Ranboo looked into his eyes. They were blue. He’d never looked very close at them before. Bright blue, and so kind, and so full of concern. He didn’t want to make Phil worry. He didn’t want to make either of them worry. Not over him.

“Yeah,” he said. Phil hummed. He finished wrapping Ranboo’s hand.

“It’s not a bad burn,” he said. “Shouldn’t take long to heal.” He tucked one end of the bandage in on itself. Ranboo nodded. “Let’s call it a day then, yeah? You look tired.” Ranboo opened his mouth to protest, but Phil was already cutting him short. “It’s time for dinner anyway, and my back’s sore from moving those boxes.”

“ *Old,* ” Techno said, thudding down into his chair, and Phil threw the wet rag at him from the water bucket. He walked into the kitchen, pulling a pot from the cabinet and searching the cabinets for ingredients. He glanced back at Ranboo as he did. Ranboo turned his hand over in his lap, examining the tips of his fingers that stuck out over the gauze before looking up to realize Techno was watching him as well. After a long pause, the man sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“Ya know, Ranboo, an allergy to water has got to be the most unfortunate allergy I’ve ever heard of,” he said with a sigh. Ranboo raised his eyebrows. “That’s like if I was allergic to pumpkin.”

“You’d eat those pastries anyway, don’t even lie,” Phil said from the kitchen.

“I’m not sayin’ I wouldn’t eat ‘em,” Techno said, “Just that it’d be *sad.* ” He inspected his helmet where it sat on the table.

“It hasn’t been a lot of fun so far,” Ranboo said quietly. Techno hummed in response. Ranboo knew he was still watching him closely, but he didn’t look back up at him. Techno liked to joke when he didn’t know what else to say, but it made Ranboo feel sour this time.

He stood and made his way over to the table by the fireplace where his memory book was and picked it up, tucking himself against the arm of the couch.

He tried to remember.

Chapter End Notes

readers can have a 7k word chapter sometimes, as a treat

Reflections

Chapter Summary

“You make some funny sounds sometimes, mate. Must be the enderman side, yeah?” Phil asked. Ranboo blushed, looking down at his plate.

“Sorry,” he said, taking a bite of potatoes.

“I didn’t mean it like it was a bad thing,” Phil corrected. “They’re nice, actually. They kind of echo in the head a bit.”

“Really?” Ranboo asked. He hadn’t known that. It must get annoying, considering how much he does it idly during the day, walking around or reading or thinking about things. He was about to apologize again, but Techno cut him off.

“I like ‘em. Breaks the quiet,” he said through a mouthful of food. “Kinda feels like cracking a knuckle, ya know?” Ranboo looked over to him. “In a good way.” Ranboo relaxed a little at that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Nether was the furthest thing from comforting, no matter how you looked at it; its heat was never anything less than stifling, dry, and dense, the air boiled from beneath by massive lakes of lava, and in every direction there was some new danger, some creature looking for food, a crumbling cliff, a remnant of the old world populated by mobs motivated only by a desire to kill. Even the trees seemed to twist their limbs out to ensnare some naive traveler. Nothing about it was welcoming.

And yet, to Technoblade, it still brought with it a bizarre calm.

Nothing could take the Nether out of him. He was born and raised in that heat, in that danger. Here, it was fight or die, and that hostility brought him some strange sense of purpose that he lacked in the Overworld. In the Nether, he had a justification for his constant skepticism. He had a reason to keep a hand on his axe, to watch his back, to keep everyone and everything at an arm’s length, and then some. It wasn’t paranoia to say that everything was out to get him—it was the truth.

Still, he knew if he was being honest with himself, he'd never return to live here in a million years. These days, the Nether was a challenge, a stress reliever, and some days a chore, but it was no longer a home. It had never been a home.

As a child, Technoblade had remained convinced that this place was, truly, hell. That he must have done something awful in some past life to have been born here. That every mob that lived here was the soul of something evil, confined to a life of pure bloodthirst and fear for the rest of their miserable existence. And that included the Piglins. He had learned from an early age that Piglins only kept each other alive for the sake of their own survival. If you didn't serve a purpose, you were left behind, or worse. From the moment he opened his eyes onto this world, he was fighting for his place in the food chain.

He wondered if he would still be able to find his way back to that bastion he grew up in. Squinting out over the lava lake that laid sprawled out under the cliff he perched on, he tried to picture the way back, the path through this landscape he'd taken... how many years ago? Maybe muscle memory would lead him there, but it had been so long that the way had long since faded from his mind.

Good, he thought. It was better that way. He didn't want to dwell on the thought of that place. It was already bad enough to be reminded every time he traded at the bastions around here, everytime he thought he saw blood on those black brick walls out of the corner of his eye only to find them clean, different, distant.

He shook his head. This was not what he wanted to be thinking about. He shoved the last piece of bread into his mouth, wiping crumbs from his face with the back of his hand before hauling himself to his feet. A wave of heat rose from the lake, the wind blowing his hair back. He breathed in, letting the singed air swirl in his lungs. Back to work.

With his helmet back on and his armor secured, he picked back up where he left off on the hoglins' trail. Winter often gave Techno and Phil a break from the usual grind of hunting since the villages around them fell back on their stored or cured meats – overhunting before winter practically guaranteed that the herds would move elsewhere by the following season, and if they were going to have a steady supply for the next year, it meant relying on reserves or on crops. That meant that they didn't trade for meat as much, so Techno and Phil only needed to hunt for the two of them. Or rather, now, the three of them.

It had been something like a month now, give or take, since he and Phil had first found Ranboo in the forest. Thirty-one days to be exact. Not that he was counting. It felt as if so much had happened since then, and simultaneously so little. The days felt long as they were passing but short looking back on them. It was strange to think back to the day they'd found Ranboo. He was so different then to now. He had been nervous, fearful, silent. Even though he never said it, Techno knew the look in his eyes, like he was anticipating something terrible, waiting for something to go wrong. It was the same tension he felt in the Nether, like there was something out there, waiting for him. The difference was that it invigorated Techno, but it froze Ranboo in his tracks.

Though in all honesty, Ranboo hadn't really lost that edge. It was lesser, now, but still there in the way he would check behind him every so often or watch the doors or windows for just a little longer than he had to after hearing a sound from outside. But Ranboo no longer jumped when Phil patted him on the shoulder or passed behind him, or when Techno would pass him a tool or a plate or a book. He didn't hesitate to speak or to ask questions or to help himself to whatever he needed.

And he had started smiling, too. Techno hadn't noticed it until Phil pointed it out, that he had hardly ever expressed anything more than content with his facial expressions before, that now he would smile or laugh or make jokes.

It was a far cry from the boy they found wailing in the snow.

Still, that was a mystery that had yet to be solved. Ranboo had a past, but it was shrouded in darkness even to the kid himself. Techno and Phil had hoped that with time would come answers, that Ranboo's memory would slowly come back to him and they'd piece together the events leading up to his arrival. When they'd talked it over, Techno brought up the idea on both of their minds; that Ranboo had forgotten something terrible. It seemed likely, they had to admit. He'd said he felt like he had been running from something, and children didn't run miles through ice and snow until their feet bled over any old thing.

To Techno, that meant one of two things; either he'd done something, or something had been done to him.

It was an uncertainty. Techno didn't like uncertainty. He didn't like not knowing. There were pieces that were out of place, questions that needed to be addressed; who, or what, had Ranboo been running from? Why was he so afraid when he woke up? Why did he sleepwalk,

why did he have nightmares, why did he stare off into space, sometimes for only a second, sometimes for hours? Why did he forget? Why did he shove his arm into a bucket of water?

Unfortunately for Ranboo, Techno was very good at telling when someone was lying. They were always small lies, always seemingly inconsequential; that he didn't remember his dreams, or that he had just been thinking about the snow when he zoned out, or that he thought he heard a noise when he jerked his head around to look behind him.

Or that he didn't remember why he had drenched his arm in water.

They were lies someone might tell when they were tired, when they didn't want to get into a conversation, when parsing through these things felt like too much work. But they added up. Techno was good at detecting patterns.

Ranboo was a bad liar, and Techno hated him for it.

It was a selfish thought, he knew. He was a selfish person. He wished it could be easy, wished that Ranboo could just be perfect, be honest, be kind and gentle and helpful and harbor no secrets or no potential threat. He wished he could be everything the world seemed to trample out, everything Techno had pushed so far away. And he wished, if Ranboo couldn't be all of that, that at the very least he could be a better liar so Techno didn't have to dwell in this skepticism. So he could be oblivious. So he could be naive. So he could trust.

He was a hypocrite. How could he demand that this complete stranger hold no secrets from him when he had hardly told him anything about his own life, his own past? Ranboo didn't ask, but Techno also didn't tell. If Ranboo didn't want to talk about whatever was troubling him, he had every right to keep it to himself.

And yet, there was something more there. It wasn't just a bitterness at being left in the dark, or a distrust of secret-keepers and bad liars. When Ranboo lied, when that look passed over his face of guilt and fear, it wasn't just skepticism that Techno felt. He'd never admit it to Ranboo, certainly not to Phil - and even now, entirely alone and with nothing and no one around to observe even a hint at this introspection - but he was worried. Whatever had happened in the kid's past was clearly not done haunting him. He didn't deserve that. He was too kind to deserve that.

A distant grunt broke Techno out of his thoughts, his ears perking up towards the sound. The hoglins were close. He needed to focus. This was when it mattered, when tracking became hunting, and Techno wasn't about to let a whole herd escape him just because he got lost too deep in thought.

There were scuffs in the ash that coated the netherrack. Tracks like these were fleeting and short lived when they were out in the open, the ash rearranged constantly by the winds of heat, but along this route they were shielded by the spires and sheer cliffs that broke apart the landscape. Techno followed them between the slopes, through a narrow valley, and eventually came upon a fork in the path ahead of him. Another massive lava lake sprawled out in front of him. To the left, there was a sheer cliff face with notches etched through the sides of it that would be barely wide enough for a Piglin. To his right, there was an open expanse of forest.

It was clear which way the hoglin herd would have traveled, but that made it all the more confusing to see tracks that traveled in both directions. The hoofprints went right towards the forest, leaving indentations in the ground where it transitioned from dense rock to soft soil. To the left, though, there was another set of tracks, sparse and old and nearly disappeared but preserved under the protection of the cliff. They weren't hoglin tracks, that was for sure, and he didn't suspect they were Piglin tracks either since they seemed to be a solitary set. Piglins tended to travel in pairs at the very least. Perhaps a stray skeleton, then.

It was odd to see skeletons in this area, especially in such a precarious spot. Perhaps they were getting bolder in their hunts. It would be bad news if that was the case. Techno already had a disdain for skeletons. They were more trouble than they were worth, easy to kill but persistent and nosy. He huffed.

A skeleton wasn't what he was here for. He turned to the forest.

Techno made quick work of the ordeal. Hunting hoglins alone was all about strategy; scatter the herd, separate one. He butchered the meat, wrapping it in wax lined parchments and tied strings around the bundles so nothing leaked through. The Nether's heat was useful for keeping these things clean, already drying out the cuts.

The way back home was uneventful. He passed by the two ghastrs that often lingered in the valley between the forest and the portal without being noticed, noting that the second of the two was still traveling the same route as when he first discovered it – or more accurately, when it first discovered him. He appreciated not being blown into the side of a cliff this time. As he walked, he thought about what they'd do with the meat; Phil tended to think in terms of practicality with these things, and would probably suggest drying what they could, making some broth, or freezing it. But the more Techno thought about it, the more he was just *craving* a hot hoglin roast. His mouth watered at the thought. It had been a while since they just made a nice meal and didn't worry too much about rationing or preserving or making things last. Maybe this once he could convince Phil to just indulge, empty the spice cabinets a bit, make a nice meal.

Traveling through the Nether portal was a feeling Techno would never fully get used to. It was like being turned upside down with the ground swept out from under you. He remembered the first time Phil had brought him through a portal into the overworld, how disoriented he'd been. How he'd faceplanted directly after arriving on the other side and couldn't stand up straight for at least ten minutes. He'd been embarrassed, but Phil gave him space to get his legs underneath him. He'd gotten better at it since then. It was majorly an act of trusting himself, holding himself still as he went through and keeping his weight distributed exactly as it was. When he came out on the other side, the swirling purple light bouncing around in his eyes, he took a breath before stepping sure-footedly off of the dark obsidian structure.

His foot landed with a crunch in the snow around the portal. He paused a moment, letting the particles of purple fade from his vision, and then set off back toward home.

He'd started opening the front door, as Phil had put it, "like a normal fucking person" now. He'd been yelled at countless times for kicking it open or ramming his shoulder into it the second he got the latch undone enough, and for a long while it had been a running joke between the two of them. Phil would scold him and Techno would brush him off, and they'd have a laugh about it because Phil didn't *really* mind. Techno fixed the dents he made in it anyway. But each time Techno crashed his way through the door with Ranboo there, the kid jumped out of his skin. Techno wasn't one to cater to other people's preferences, but the way he looked ready to bolt every time he was scared made Techno feel something tug at his heart, and slamming the door open wasn't as fun anymore.

He undid the latch and opened the door slowly, shouldering off his pack so it fell into the crook of his elbow before letting it down to the floor. Ranboo was sitting at the kitchen table with his feet pulled up onto the chair and supporting his head with one knee. In front of him, he had open two books (his memory book and a book written in Enchanted) and a roll of parchment. He and Techno had been slowly making their way through translating more of the

books in his collection, and Philza had told him that the kid often opened one up before he went to bed, reading it by lantern light and taking notes on things he thought might be important.

Ranboo looked up when Techno entered and smiled softly. As he did, he gingerly closed his memory book and slid it to the side with practiced care.

“Which one are you reading?” Techno asked as he went through the motions of taking his armor off.

“Uh, it's on potions. It's one of Phil's, actually.” Techno hummed. He dropped his armor on top of the chest by the door. When he came back from the Nether now, he saved his armor polishing for later when he went back to his own cabin. Better safe than sorry. Ranboo's arm had fully healed from the water bucket incident, and Techno rathered it stayed that way.

“Where is he?” Techno asked. He wiped the ash from his face with a kitchen rag.

“Phil?” Techno nodded. “Basement. He wants to try out one of these recipes.” Techno glanced over to the page of notes Ranboo was writing. Some of the potion recipes were ones he knew well, potions of healing or regeneration, poisons and weakness pots. But there were a few he hadn't ever seen the recipes for before, like potions that enhanced strength or speed or even one that was noted to improve night vision. He didn't know if the recipes would work without some kind of knowledge of enchantments, but he also knew Phil never shied away from a challenge, and something like this was exactly the kind of things he'd need to test to resolve his own curiosity.

“Which one is he going for?”

“Strength, I think. It needs Blaze powder,” Ranboo said, consulting the page.

“He's gonna waste Blaze powder on this?” Techno asked incredulously. Ranboo shrugged at the same time that Phil emerged from the basement with a few small glass jars of glittering orange dust.

“It’s not a *waste*, ” Phil tutted. He put the jars down on the table.

“You’re replacing whatever you use up,” Techno said. “I lost an eyebrow last time I went to the fortress.”

“Sounds like your combat needs some work, then,” Phil smirked, and Techno rolled his eyes and threw the red-dusted rag into the sink basin. Phil walked around the table, leaning over Ranboo’s notes. He dragged his finger down the page until he found the instructions he was looking for. Ranboo leaned back to let him look. “Is that a two or a three?” he asked. Ranboo inspected his notes.

“That’s an eight,” he said.

“ *Eight* hours? To brew?” Ranboo nodded hesitantly, as if he’d personally offended Phil himself. Phil groaned. “This better work.” He turned back to Techno, who’d begun unpacking the cuts of hoglin from his bag. “Hunt went well, I take it?” Techno nodded.

“There’s a herd passing through in the forest south of the portal. Hopefully they stick around.” Phil helped him unpack, with Ranboo’s help to run cuts down to the cold storage in the basement to freeze. As he emerged from the stairs, Techno looked up. “You ever had hoglin, Ranboo?” Ranboo looked up with his eyebrows raised. Techno inwardly rolled his eyes at himself. “Right. Well. It’s good. Phil makes it seared with these spices from the northern village, and just,” Techno raised his hands in praise for effect. Phil rolled his eyes.

“That sounds nice,” Ranboo said thoughtfully.

“It’s to die for.”

“Techno, if you want me to make steak, just say so,” Phil said.

“I want you to make steak,” Techno responded. There was a pause between them. “Please,” he added. Phil smiled and shook his head.

“I *just* got those spices, mate—”

“So they’re fresh! Perfect timing.” Phil groaned. “What else would you use them for? You got dinner plans? Someone comin’ over I don’t know about? Got a date with one of the village ladies? I think Maria had her eye on you last time I went—”

“Shut up,” Phil laughed, “If her husband heard you say that, you’d never make another trade there again.” He shook his head. “A steak night does sound nice, I’ll admit. Better than sitting around watching potions brew.”

Techno smiled. *Victory.*

Phil cooked similarly to how he worked; talking the entire time. He enlisted Ranboo to help him prepare the food, washing the potatoes, cutting up carrots, adding spices to a marinade as Phil instructed him. It was very different from building, Ranboo noted. Phil worked much less according to a set plan, far more interested in improvising and adjusting as he went. Ranboo didn’t really know how much a “pinch” was, or a “bit,” or a “splash,” but when he would ask, Phil would just make some vague gesture that Ranboo had to decode for himself. Regardless, the food came out looking and smelling fantastic, and he had managed not to completely ruin anything aside from one burnt potato and a carrot dropped on the floor, both of which he apologized profusely for only to be shushed abruptly.

Techno had been preparing some other sections of meat to dry, occasionally stopping into the kitchen to steal a roasted potato or dip his finger into the marinade. When he did, Phil slapped his hand away, and he slinked away like a scolded child. It made Ranboo smile. The two of them were fun to watch.

Dinner was ready around an hour later, and Ranboo and Phil brought plates and utensils and food over to the table. Phil got himself and Techno some dark drink that smelled earthy and

fermented, and when Techno offered Ranboo a glass, he and Phil both said “no” at the same time. Techno raised his eyebrows at Phil.

“He’s too young,” Phil said. “I’m not dealing with a drunk teenager.” Techno rolled his eyes dramatically and sat down.

“It smells funny, anyway,” Ranboo said quietly, and Phil chuckled.

“Never had ale before I came to the overworld,” Techno said. He swirled his mug around before taking a swig. “One of the best things in this place.” He paused. “And pumpkins.”

“It’s got its perks,” Phil said. “Much less risk of burning alive, here, too.” Ranboo’s eyes widened a bit and Phil laughed. “The whole underground of the Nether is lava lakes,” he explained. “Gotta watch your step.”

They began serving themselves from the platters of meat and vegetables, and Ranboo followed their lead. Soon, everyone’s plate was stacked with hot food, and Techno dug into his before he even set his plate back down in front of him.

It was silent at first as they all savoured the flavor - Techno was right, Phil had made the food perfectly. The meat was tender and loaded with spice, and the potatoes and carrots were roasted in the leftover broth, making them soft. His other cooking wasn’t bad by any means, but this was certainly a step up.

As he finished a bite, Phil stretched, fanning his wings out, the huge black feathers, trembling as he rolled his shoulders, and before he could second guess it, Ranboo found himself asking a question that had been in his mind from the moment he saw Phil’s wings.

“What does flying feel like?”

Phil swallowed and folded his wings back in. “Flying?” Ranboo nodded. Phil hummed, thinking. “It’s a bit hard to explain, I suppose. Kinda like if someone asked you how running felt. I guess I’d compare it to falling, really. Like if you jumped off a mountain, but never hit the ground.” Ranboo blinked, trying to imagine it. “You can feel the air all around you, that’s

my favorite part. All of your movements have to mean something in relation to the air, and you've gotta know what the drafts and winds mean."

"How does it work, though?" Ranboo asked. Phil raised his eyebrows at this question.

"Well... without getting too deep into the details of it, it's basically just lift, thrust, and angles. The shape of the wings catches air at the right angle so that it goes under and then pushes up, and then you flap to push up further." Phil demonstrated what he meant with his hands, holding one flat and using the other one to show how the air moved to push the back of his hand up. "It's more fun in the Nether, actually."

"You're the only person who would ever call the Nether *fun*," Techno sighed.

"Why?" Ranboo asked.

"Heat rises. Over the lava pools especially there's these huge updrafts that can just send you rocketing upwards," Phil said smiling. He had such a sparkle in his eye when he spoke about it that it made Ranboo smile as well, and he unintentionally let a chirp out from the back of his throat. He tried to hide it by clearing his throat, but Techno and Phil both smiled.

"You make some funny sounds sometimes, mate. Must be the enderman side, yeah?" Phil asked. Ranboo blushed, looking down at his plate.

"Sorry," he said, taking a bite of potatoes.

"I didn't mean it like it was a bad thing," Phil corrected. "They're nice, actually. They kind of echo in the head a bit."

"Really?" Ranboo asked. He hadn't known that. It must get annoying, considering how much he does it idly during the day, walking around or reading or thinking about things. He was about to apologize again, but Techno cut him off.

“I like ‘em. Breaks the quiet,” he said through a mouthful of food. “Kinda feels like cracking a knuckle, ya know?” Ranboo looked over to him. “In a good way.” Ranboo relaxed a little at that.

“It kinda feels the same way for me, actually. Like a... a release?”

“Like laughing, maybe? An expression?” Phil asked, and Ranboo nodded.

“Yeah, I guess. Something like that.”

“We’ve all got little hybrid things like that. Techno snorts,” Phil noted with a smirk, and Techno rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you’ve heard it by now.” Ranboo stifled a laugh.

“It’s better than all the groans those villagers make,” Techno said. He and Phil both made a *hrmm* sound in unison, and then laughed at the timing.

“We’ll have to take you to the village sometime soon, Ranboo,” Phil said. “You’ll probably enjoy looking at all the stuff they’ve got there to trade. Some folks there go a long way out just to find interesting things.” Ranboo smiled.

“That sounds fun,” he said. “There’s two near here, right?” Phil nodded.

“Yeah, the one to the east is our usual favorite, but there’s the one to the north as well, and they’ve got more spices and potion ingredients there. But they’re a bit more... hm.”

“Asshole-ish,” Techno supplied.

“Not the way I would have phrased it,” Phil mumbled, but he didn’t deny it. Ranboo raised his eyebrows.

“Why?”

“They’re just... not fond of outsiders, I guess.”

“It’s nothing to do with *outsiders*,” Techno said. “They don’t like hybrids.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. He poked at his food with his fork.

“They’ll trade with us, but they’re certainly not hospitable,” Phil said. “Villages in general are pretty tight knit, they keep to their own. The northern one is just more picky with who they engage with. Outsiders are dangerous in general, but they see hybrids even more so.”

“And they’ll say it to your face,” Techno muttered. “Phil’s the only one they’ll trade with, since I apparently look “feral” to them.” He waved around a fork with a chunk of meat on it for effect.

“Oh,” Ranboo said again, quieter. If they thought Techno looked scary, he was fairly certain he wouldn’t be let anywhere near that village. He startled at his own reflection sometimes, something about the height and the claws and the eyes made him a jarring sight.

“But the east villagers are much nicer, I promise,” Phil said, cheering up a bit. “Plus the younger children there love to see new things, so we’ve always got a bit of a welcome wagon when we arrive.” Techno huffed and smiled.

“The kids like to braid my hair every time we go. One side always ends up looking like a rat nest,” he snorted. Phil smiled and shook his head.

“Both of them still keep pretty closed off, but it makes sense honestly,” Phil said. “The Overworld has some dangerous people. You’re much safer in groups. And since hybrids are rare, I think that’s all the more reason to stick together.”

Ranboo nodded thoughtfully, wondering who exactly these “dangerous people” were. He didn’t ask.

After dinner was done and the dishes and pans were soaking in the sink, the three hybrids stayed in each other's company in Philza’s cabin. Techno sat at the kitchen table reading a stack of Ranboo’s translations by the light of a lantern which glinted off of his glasses. Ranboo sat in front of the fire similarly to how he often did at night, too close for Phil’s comfort, with his arms around his knees staring into the dancing flame, caught up in thought. He had his memory book next to him, closed around a piece of charcoal, and every so often he’d pick it up and read a few pages or write something down.

Phil couldn’t tell if Ranboo’s memory was getting better or not. It was difficult to gauge. Ranboo often consulted the book at every chance he got, but Phil never knew what he wrote in it. He’d promised the boy he wouldn’t read it, and Phil wasn’t one to go back on his word. He just hoped if there was something Ranboo needed help with, he’d feel comfortable enough to ask.

Philza was sat on the couch, a thick woven cloak on his lap. He was sewing the panels to each other and adding the final touches to the lining. It was a dark, midnight purple fabric, flecked with spots of navy blue and lighter purple and black where the dye had been intentionally deepened or watered down. It gave it the appearance of the night sky, and if Phil were to indulge in his own ego for a moment, he’d consider it to be one of the best pieces he’d made to date. The inside was lined with dark wool, and the fur at the hood was grey and white.

It was for Ranboo. The kid had been living out of Phil and Techno’s hand-me-down closets, and while the clothes were functional, they were certainly not new. He’d already commissioned a new pair of boots from the leatherworker in the east village, and he’d started on a pair of pants that would actually reach Ranboo’s ankles. Eventually, Phil knew he’d probably need armor of some kind, especially if they were going to take him through the woods to the village or if he ever needed to venture into the Nether for some reason. Techno was much better with metalwork, though, so he’d leave that to him.

He heard a page turn behind him and glanced back at Techno, who was engrossed in the translations, already having gone through several pages. He compared them to the books they came from. Phil wondered if he would ever be able to learn the language itself. He doubted it. Ranboo didn't seem to remember how he even knew this language in the first place. It was unlikely he'd be able to teach it.

Ranboo shifted where he sat in front of the fire, letting his head rest on his knees. He chirped again as he settled further into his position, and Phil smiled. He really did like that sound.

Phil and Techno were generally very quiet people on their own. It was enough to just be in each other's company silently, but Ranboo's Endermen mannerisms brought sound and life into that quiet. It was like a reminder that someone new was here. It was nice to have someone new.

It seemed they were all becoming aware that this was a new normal; it was unspoken, but the idea of "temporary" had slowly diminished into a new feeling of home. Techno had gone from pretending Ranboo didn't exist to trusting him almost as much as he trusted Phil. And Ranboo finally seemed to be settled in, comfortable in the space, and sure of his role in the relationship between the three of them. He wasn't "paying his rent" anymore; he was taking care of his home.

There was a part of Phil that hoped they never found the home Ranboo had left behind.

It was a selfish thought. An incredibly selfish thought. But it hurt to think that after they'd finally all settled in with each other, something could come and take it away. Phil looked over to Ranboo, still resting his head on his knees. The heat from the fire blew strands of his hair up into the air. It was getting longer, sweeping into his eyes now. Phil would have to offer to cut it if he wanted, or find some other solution if not.

Things would feel so empty now, without him. Phil had already felt that emptiness once before, when Wilbur had left to explore the world. It was like he'd been left with a hole in his chest, some part of him leaving as well.

Phil looked back down at the cloak, the final stitches laying flat and even against the side panels. He flattened it out against the couch, picking off a piece of fluff. It was longer than any garment he'd made before, but he was happy with how it came out.

In the back of his head, he felt a low, quiet groan building, hardly there. It tickled at the base of his skull. He looked up, first at Ranboo, then over at Techno, who was also peering at the boy from where he sat.

Ranboo made this sound in particular when he was getting a bit too lost in thought. When he heard it, Phil would often find him standing still, frozen and staring off at nothing, or looking blankly out the window, or at a book, or into the fire like he was now.

Phil stood, picking the cloak up by either shoulder, and walked over to where Ranboo sat. He cleared his throat as he approached, though that had never done much to lessen the startled response he always got when drawing him out of his own head. He draped the garment around Ranboo's shoulders, and the boy jumped, straightening his posture and looking around.

"Just me," Phil said softly, lowering himself to the floor next to Ranboo. Ranboo blinked a few times, the look of disorientation slowly leaving his face. "What were you thinking about?" Ranboo narrowed his eyes, but didn't answer. Instead, he brought his hands up to feel the cloak on his shoulders and ran his fingers down the length of it, examining the dark fabric. "Finally finished that," Phil said. He stretched his back and leaned against the arm of the couch.

"It's for me?" Phil nodded, smiling. Ranboo inspected it closer, flipping it to see the lining, pulling it off slightly to look at the hood and collar. He looked back up at Phil for a moment. His eyes caught the firelight, sparkling with glints of orange and red. He stared down at the cloak again. "Thank you," he said. His voice was so quiet Phil almost couldn't hear him. "It's beautiful." Phil stretched out his wings, nudging Ranboo with his right one to get him to lean forward a bit so he could rest his wing over the boy's shoulders.

"You alright?" Phil asked.

"Hm?" Ranboo looked up at him, then shook his head with a soft smile. "Yeah, just tired." He pulled the cloak tighter around his shoulders, tucking his knees up closer. "It's so soft," he marveled.

“It’s wool in the lining, and I traded for some fox pelts last time I went to the village for the hood. Techno likes that texture, too.”

Ranboo hummed. He watched the fire dance, his eyes half lidded. He looked happy. It made Phil’s heart warm. They sat in silence for a few moments, enjoying the warmth and the quiet. Phil went back and forth on whether or not to break the silence, but he figured he should say what was on his mind, if only because he knew Ranboo would appreciate knowing it.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ranboo,” Phil said. Ranboo tilted his head towards him. “And I know Techno feels the same, even though he’d never say it.” Techno grunted from where he sat, and Phil looked over in time to see him roll his eyes. “The circumstance was a bit odd, but I’m happy we met nonetheless.” Ranboo’s eyes were wide like a deer’s, his ears pulled back slightly like he’d been taken fully off guard, or like this was the last thing he expected to hear. He heard the sound of papers rustling as Techno set down his reading and walked to the fire, opening his palms to the heat as he stood by them.

“A bit of a rocky start,” Techno said.

“I, um...” Ranboo cleared his throat and looked at his hands. Phil hoped he wasn’t about to make the kid cry. “Me too. I’m glad we met too. I like it here, with um. With you guys.”

“Hybrids gotta stick together,” Phil said. The corner of Ranboo’s mouth tugged into a smile.

“Plus, I’m like, ninety percent sure you aren’t gonna try to kill either of us now, so that’s a bonus,” Techno said with a shrug, and Ranboo looked up at him.

“You, uh, keep mentioning that... people trying to kill you...” he said cautiously. Techno snorted.

“A story for another time,” he said nonchalantly. “Remind me to tell you about the Butcher Army someday,” he said.

“I-I’m not going to remember to do that,” Ranboo said quietly, and Techno huffed a laugh.

“Phil, remind me—”

“Yeah, got it,” Phil interrupted lightheartedly. Techno rubbed his hands together before cracking his knuckles and stepping back.

“I’m gonna head to bed,” he said mid-yawn, turning toward the door. “I’m actually tired for once. Not gonna let that slip away.”

“G’night, mate,” Phil said. He stood as well, untucking his wing from behind Ranboo. “I think it’s time to turn in for all of us.”

“I’m gonna sit here for a bit longer, I think,” Ranboo said, staying put.

“Spent all that time making a nice bed for you and you still want to sleep in the living room,” Phil tutted. Ranboo laughed softly.

“Just until the fire goes out,” he said. “It’s nice.” Phil smiled.

“Whatever you say,” he said. He’d heard the same from the boy several times now only to find him asleep against the couch come morning.

“Night,” Techno called from the door. Ranboo and Phil returned the farewell. As Phil walked to the stairs, he threw a glance back toward Ranboo. He’d pulled the cloak tight around his shoulders, his hair nearly lost under the thick fur of the collar. He figured he’d probably find him there in the morning, but that was alright. He had young bones.

Phil dimmed the lantern on the kitchen table and padded upstairs, the bubbling of the brewing stand and crackle of the fire fading into the background.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title... the calm before the lore >:D

also, cus I feel like some folks might be curious, I'll answer this now: no, Phil didn't kill Wilbur in this timeline.

Anywho, thanks for reading!! Hope you enjoyed! Plot's gonna start picking up pace soon, so..... :)

Pyre

Chapter Summary

The panic grew. It felt like a dream, disorienting and unfamiliar and alien. This was foreign to him. There was no before . There was only this, only his estranged body standing rigid in a space he didn't recognize, a mind empty of any context or memory that might tell him, this is where you are, who you are, what you are.

He waited for it to come back to him. Waited to wake. Waited for the flood of reality that came with the end of a dream, but it didn't come. Why wasn't it coming?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ranboo found fire to be particularly relaxing to watch. Something about the way the flames seemed to have a mind of their own, the way they flickered, was mesmerising. The warmth that radiated off of it made the world seem so much more comfortable. Heat would prick at his nose and cheeks and hands, and he could watch for hours as the colors changed from orange to yellow to red, sometimes blue as the fire ate up more kindling and spread. He'd track the embers as they flew up into the air, red and then white and then grey as they fizzled out and floated about until they found a perch to smudge off on.

The fire was calming. Hypnotic. He watched it as it flicked fingers of color out and up. When he blinked, he felt the heat on his eyelids, a strange sensation, and when he opened his eyes again the light would glint off his eyelashes. It spread slowly, consuming, and when it did he basked in the wave of heat that would radiate out, blowing strands of hair out of his face and making his skin sting just slightly.

It was dark out, and silent in a way that only the dead of night could be, aside from the crackling of wood. Something in his head was telling him, *sleep*. It said, *it's late. Go back to bed*. The sound of the fire was becoming louder as it ate up more fuel, the room brighter, the heat surrounding him like a blanket.

It's nice, isn't it?

He blinked again, slowly, feeling himself sway. It was nice. Warm. He closed his eyes.

Sleep.

But it was louder than he'd like, brighter than he'd like. Sleep was meant to be quiet and dark.

Light is safer than dark.

That was true. But it was getting hot.

Yes, it's nice, isn't it?

It wasn't warm like it was before. It was hot, and it was loud, and it was bright—

The skin on his arm suddenly stung, an itchy white-hot sting that jarred his eyes open and made him jump back purely on instinct. With it came a rush of feeling, the tiredness wicked away from his mind and replaced by an abrupt sense of panic.

There was fire. *Real* fire.

It crawled its way across the floor, crept up wooden cabinets, consuming. It was hot, not like the comfort of a lantern or a candle or a fireplace. It was stifling, dense, difficult to breathe. It made his lungs feel cooked, his throat singed. But despite the heat that licked at his skin, he was frozen in place, his feet rooted so firmly to the ground he wondered if he'd ever break free.

The panic grew. It felt like a dream, disorienting and unfamiliar and alien. This was foreign to him. There was no *before*. There was only this, only his estranged body standing rigid in a space he didn't recognize, a mind empty of any context or memory that might tell him, *this is where you are, who you are, what you are.*

He waited for it to come back to him. Waited to wake. Waited for the flood of reality that came with the end of a dream, but it didn't come. Why wasn't it coming?

He was standing in a kitchen, he could tell from the sink and the stove and the handful of pots and pans that were becoming black with ash. Was this space his? Was it home? When he moved his head to look around, he felt like a wooden doll, creaking into motion with stuttered jerks. The fire lit up the room. There was a door, a mirror, a hallway lined with frames, a table and chairs and a stack of books, a couch, a dark pile of fabric.

It meant nothing, it meant *nothing*, how could it make him feel so empty?

A whoosh of air brought his head snapping back to the kitchen. The curtain that hung to the right of the window had caught fire, and the flames were eating their way quickly up the fabric. He should do something. He should be doing something. He should have already *done* something. Why was he just standing there? How long had he been watching this happen?

Next to the curtain, there was a frame that held a drawing on old browning paper, a portrait of a man with soft eyes and fluffy hair and it felt like something in his memory cracked into place with enough force to make him stagger back a step.

Philza, he needed Philza, he needed—

“Phil!” The name tore from his throat. He didn't even recognize it, but it didn't matter; it meant something. If he remembered it, it had to have meant something. This place had to have meant something.

The thought was enough to force his body into action. He lunged forward, reaching out to pull the portrait from the wall. The glass of the frame had cracked from the heat. The skin on his arm and hand itched and stung from the fire, and he shook it out as he stepped back, looking around wildly for something, anything, he didn't know what. A place to put the portrait down where it would be safe, a bucket of water, a towel to smother the flames. “Philza, there's a fire! There's fire!”

He threw the portrait to the table where it skidded across, stopping just before it fell over the edge. There was a worn rag on the edge of the counter, untouched by the flame, and he grabbed it and began smothering the fire closest to him. As he did, he heard footsteps above him, frantic and fast. He turned his head and saw the man rushing towards him, faltering for a moment as he took in the sight of the kitchen before his expression steeled with purpose.

“Phil,” yes, this was Phil, Philza, he was sure of it now, “I—”

“Take this,” Phil cut him off. He grabbed the rag from Ranboo’s hands and replaced it with a metal bucket, which Ranboo fumbled and nearly dropped. “Go get water from the spigot, and wake Techno up.” He turned and used the rag to sweep everything on the counter into the sink basin, turning his head away as a wave of smoke and embers lashed out.

Ranboo could have done that. Why didn’t he think to do that? Why hadn’t he done it when the fire first started? He had just stood in the kitchen watching it grow, his mind numb. It still felt as though he was waking up, not all the way there. This house felt like something he’d imagined, something he’d dreamt up years ago and only just recalled with the faintest of familiarity.

Move. He needed to move. Move, move, move, what the hell is he just *standing* there for?

“Ranboo!” Phil’s voice was sharp. It made him jump.

“Sorry,” he said, gripping the bucket tighter, and he ran to the door and flung it open. The cold hit him like a slap to the face and made him cough, gagging on the sudden change in temperature. His feet and fingers went numb almost immediately. Get water, wake Techno. Techno? He faltered, then gritted his teeth and shook his head hard. It was all so close, right there on the edge of knowing. There was another house to the left of the one he just exited, the porches connected to each other, and he began to walk toward it before hearing his name called out.

“Ranboo!” He whipped his head toward the sound and felt a rush as memories came back to him; pink hair, hair that Philza had said the village children would braid, and the village was to the east, but not just to the east, there was another one, another one in the north, where Philza bought tea leaves— “I heard you shoutin’ about fire,” Techno said.

He was knelt down next to a bucket placed under a spigot, water pouring in, and Ranboo realized he hadn't known where the tap was before he saw it just now, stuck out of the side of Phil's house. This place was important. It was home.

You can remember the important things.

He shivered.

"Take this one and gimme that," Techno said, and lifted the bucket by the handle to hold out for Ranboo to take. They traded, one full bucket for one empty. Something in Ranboo's mind warned him to be careful not to spill any on himself. When he turned, he saw the shed that he'd helped work on, the beet farm, the barn with the calf named Esther, Phil's cabin with the lanterns that hung by the door. The window was black with soot now. There was a crack in the bottom pane.

The feeling of forgetting was familiar, but he hated it so much more now that he remembered what he'd forgotten. It felt traitorous.

Inside, Phil had pulled down the burning curtain and was stamping it out with his bare foot. When Ranboo came in, he took the bucket and splashed some over the fabric before turning to douse the countertop and floor. The fire had felt huge when he was standing right in front of it, but with the curtain down and the kindling removed from the countertop, it was beginning to die out. The water hissed when it met flame and smoke and steam billowed up to the ceiling. Ranboo took over the task of stamping out the curtain.

As he kicked the fabric over onto itself to smother it even further, he noticed shards of broken glass on the floor. On the counter above, the brewing stand lay on its side with another shattered bottle underneath it and one still left intact, dark liquid pooling underneath it that was blackened and bubbly at the edges where the fire had eaten at it.

That was what started the fire. It had been knocked over.

A pit began to grow in Ranboo's stomach.

The front door swung open and Techno appeared with another bucket of water, which he threw over the remaining fire on the countertop and cabinets.

The chaos seemed to end immediately, abruptly, and the three of them were left standing in the dark kitchen, lit only by the spots of smouldering wood that were left over in the wake of the fire. It was only now that Ranboo began to truly feel himself. Awake. Aware. Techno walked around the room lighting the lanterns, and doing so far more carefully than usual.

Phil sighed heavily. He leaned over the counter, opening the window. As he did, the bottom pane fell out entirely and landed on the counter below with a crash. He eyed it with frustration, as though it had personally offended him, and then pulled the shutters closed to block out the wind. As he pulled away from the window, he picked up the now-charred statue of a cow that had rested on the windowsill. He looked around at his kitchen, covered in sooty water and ash. He looked over the brewing stand where it was toppled over, nudging some of the glass pieces with his finger, and Ranboo felt a sudden guilt overcome him.

It couldn't have been him, could it? He wouldn't have done this. Why... no, he wouldn't have. But his memory before waking in the kitchen was blank. He remembered the day before with about as much clarity as he usually did; he had translated some texts for Phil, they had made dinner, he fell asleep in front of the fireplace. Then he woke up standing in a kitchen on fire. If it was impossible for him to have done this, then why did he feel so guilty?

There was a creak as Techno opened up the front door, fanning smoke out with a towel.

"I, um—" Ranboo's voice cracked, sore from the smoke he'd inhaled. He coughed and cleared his throat as Phil turned to look at him. "I saved the drawing." He walked to the table and picked up the frame with the cracked glass. "The one by the window, before the curtain caught." Phil's eyes lit up with relief, or maybe gratitude, Ranboo couldn't tell, but he crossed the space between them and held his hand out for the portrait. Ranboo gave it to him. Phil looked it over, running his thumb over the crack in the glass before thudding himself down into a chair. He stared down at the drawing for a moment before smiling. Ranboo didn't know how he could possibly smile after all that damage.

“Thank you,” he said. Ranboo nodded. Phil leaned back in the chair. “It’s good you woke up when you did,” he said. “The damage isn’t actually too bad, all things considered.” Ranboo looked back at the kitchen. The counters, cabinets, and ceiling were coated in ash, and the wood was buckled and cracked. It certainly didn’t look good. But then again, if it had spread further, the damage could have been immense.

He should have noticed it sooner. He *did* notice it sooner. He watched it grow and did nothing. He dug his nails into his palm, a lump forming in his throat.

“Ranboo?” Ranboo looked up to meet Phil’s gaze. “You alright?” He felt panicked. He needed to calm down, think rationally. This wasn’t a trick question. Phil was just worried about him. He was acting weird. He nodded again, trying to let his tension go unsuccessfully. “Not burned or anything?” He shook his head.

“No, or, nothing bad at least. I burned my arm a bit,” he said, twisting his wrist to get a better look at his forearm. That was the burn that woke him up. Or to be more accurate, the one that made him realize there was danger. The skin was red, but not terribly. “It’s fine though.”

“Your, uh. Your tail is a bit...” Techno cleared his throat. “Singed.” Ranboo perked his ears up, flicking his tail up at his side and catching it in his hand. Techno was right. The feathery end was charred, melted by heat at some point in the scramble to extinguish the fire.

“Oh,” he said, furrowing his brow. He wondered when that had happened. He let it go, and it flicked around his ankle, less soft now than it was before. He looked back to the kitchen and made his way over to the toppled brewing stand. The curtain was still lying there, half intact. Careful not to step on any glass, he leaned over and inspected the shattered bottles on the counter.

“That must have been what started it, right?” Techno said. He closed the front door, rubbing his hands together to warm them up. “You didn’t leave the stove on, did you?” Ranboo righted the metal stand. Glass tinkled as he did.

“No, it doesn’t even have any wood left in it. I’ve never had an issue leaving the stand burning overnight before,” Phil said, and Ranboo felt sour.

“It must have boiled over,” Techno said.

He felt watched. He didn’t know if Phil and Techno were really watching him, but he didn’t have the courage to look. This had never happened before, Phil said it himself. The brewing stand wasn’t just boiled over, it was on it’s side. He didn’t remember what he was doing before he realized there was a fire. He had stood in the kitchen and watched it grow, and he didn’t remember waking up, didn’t remember standing, walking to the kitchen.

Trying to remember was like trying to grab smoke. Some things felt familiar, even when he forgot them. Some things came back. He could tell when they would; it was a different kind of forgetting, a half memory, like a word on the tip of his tongue that just needs a push to escape. Those memories took up space. This, things like this, they didn’t. They were never there to begin with, moments observed like how a mirror doesn’t remember the faces it’s seen. They were void.

He’d forgotten like this before. There were nights that felt like this when he woke up, left with the knowledge that something happened, but never to remember what. It felt like this during a normal day where a moment would disappear, an hour or a minute or a second. It felt like this when he’d come back to himself after plunging his hand into a bucket of water. All he would ever have is remnants left behind like footprints; a scratch on the back of his hand, indentations from his fingernails, something not quite where he left it. A word left behind in his memory book.

You can remember the important things.

It was a taunt. Bile rose in his throat. This was familiar, a voice that spoke with malicious joy, mocking him for his uncertainty, or for forgetting his friends, he didn’t know which. Both. He was somewhere between afraid and furious. He gripped the metal of the brewing stand so tightly his hand began to shake. He put it down to avoid Phil or Techno noticing and shut his eyes tight. In his mind, he willed one word: *Stop*. He waited, met with silence.

“I take it you didn’t see it start, Ranboo,” Phil said, and Ranboo opened his eyes. When he turned, Phil and Techno were watching him, and he felt cold. He shook his head silently. Phil’s expression changed, curious. *Suspicious*. His jaw tightened. “You’re sure you’re alright?”

Careful. Ranboo's ears twitched. *Some things are better kept secret.* He wanted to scream.

"It was probably quite a scare waking up to that, yeah?" Phil prodded. Ranboo tried to meet his gaze but his eyes shook too much to hold steady, so he looked down at his hands instead.

"Yeah, I'm just..." Guilty. *Confess.* "Shaken up."

"Could've gone worse," Techno said with a shrug. "Could've burned the whole house down." Ranboo and Phil both looked over to him with a very similar look. "Just trying to help," he said, putting his hands up defensively before crossing his arms. To be fair, he was right. But it didn't make it feel better. Phil rolled his eyes, taking a deep breath. He looked back down at the framed drawing in his hands, looking over it fondly.

"Have I told you about Wilbur, Ranboo?" Philza asked. The question startled Ranboo, taking him off guard. Phil continued before he could answer. "I don't think I have," he said, and Ranboo was grateful he was cut off before he had to admit he didn't remember. "Back in another life, I settled down in this little village, and I met a kid with the biggest heart for adventure I've ever seen. Taught him everything I knew. Way before I met Techno. Though I think they would've gotten along, he was a bookworm, too. And a bit of a contrarian." Techno snorted.

It was strange to think of a younger Phil, a Phil separate from everything Ranboo knew him for now. As he spoke, he unhinged the back of the frame.

"He set off on his own eventually. Wanted to explore the world for himself, but he gave me this before he left." From the back of the frame, Phil pulled a folded piece of paper that had been tucked behind the drawing. He opened the top part, glancing over the words. Ranboo couldn't see what they said, but Phil's eyes shined with pride and nostalgia. He smiled and shook his head. "He was like a son to me. You remind me of him. You've got those kind eyes."

Ranboo felt like the breath had been taken from his lungs.

“Thank you for saving this,” Phil said, and he held Ranboo’s gaze for a long moment. Ranboo couldn’t find his voice, so instead he just nodded, and Phil offered him a smile. “I’m, ah...” Phil put his hands on his knees and stood slowly. “I’m going back to bed. We can deal with this,” he gestured to the ruins of the kitchen. “Tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Techno said.

“Try to sleep,” Phil said as Techno opened the door, and Techno waved his hand dismissively as he closed it behind him. Phil turned to Ranboo.

“Turn off the lanterns before you go to bed,” Phil said, and then raised his eyebrows to punctuate the statement. Ranboo breathed out an exhausted laugh and nodded again, and Phil turned to walk back upstairs.

Alone in the kitchen, Ranboo looked around again, suddenly feeling the true tiredness that had been forgotten in the chaos. He walked slowly to the kitchen table, eyeing the letter that Philza had left there, but for all his curiosity he didn’t open it. Instead, he dimmed the lantern on the table as well as the lantern by the door and by the fireplace. As he turned to walk back to his room, he noted the cloak, *his* cloak, pooled on the arm of the couch. He picked it up. It felt like a lifetime had happened between now and the evening before. And then there was his memory book set at the edge of the table. Lot of help that had been lately.

He folded the cloak over one arm, his memory book and charcoal pencil in the other, and trudged half-blindly to his room. In the darkness, he could make out the shape of his bed, the bed he and Phil had made. A hand-knit blanket lay at the foot, a bedside table against the wall, a stack of books in the corner. He let his shoulders drop, shaking his head as he processed the night’s events.

The floorboards underneath him creaked as he sat down on the edge of the mattress, wrapping the cloak around his shoulders. Uncertainty was becoming part of his normal. He looked down at the book. The corners were beginning to show wear, softened with use. He’d already had to ask Philza for several new sticks of charcoal. It didn’t help that he’d wake sometimes to find them snapped in half or worn halfway down. He rubbed one eye with the heel of his palm. Despite his tiredness, he had to write down everything that had happened, so he lit the lantern on his bedside table and flipped open the book.

He flicked through the pages to find where last he left off, rolling the charcoal in between his thumb and forefinger as he did until he got to his most recent entry.

When he found it, his blood ran cold.

Across the right-side page, written in messy, heavy script were four words:

YOU LIT THE FIRE

The world turned into static.

Chapter End Notes

... >:)

Hope you liked this chapter!! A few things I wanted to note!

1.) Cus I know some people will be asking this (and spoilers for the dsmp plot but it was forever ago), no, Phil did not kill Wilbur in this timeline. Also no, he's not his biological son.

2.) Someone asked a bit ago if Ranboo has nystagmus (where your eyes shake involuntarily) and lowkey wasn't expecting anyone to pick up on that so props to ashbhere lol - the answer is technically yes! I have nystagmus personally and I felt like it was an interesting dynamic to add to the aversion to eye contact trait.

3.) I updated the chapter count! I've got 24 (possibly 25?) chapters planned for this fic, so... if you're sticking with me, y'all are in it for the long run! Also we're halfway through! Wild!

Thanks for reading!! Also thanks to everyone who's been commenting! Literally makes my whole day. See u next chapter :)

The Coward

Chapter Summary

After spending some time here, he felt a bit less on edge than at first. Frankly, it seemed the expectations for him to really interact with everyone were low. He wondered how much he had Phil to thank for that. He didn't mind being called weird. It made him feel less like he had to perform, blend in, act normal. Maria stopped at a stall with a woman who had set out some jewelry to sell and was fully engrossed in her conversation so much so that even Emmett got bored and wandered off. Ranboo decided to do the same, tentatively walking around to the different stores and stalls, looking through windows and getting a closer look at different things to buy. Maria had said it was a sort of yard sale, that at the end of every two weeks merchants would set out everything they wanted to clear out. It was good timing for their visit.

While Ranboo was walking from one store to the next, he suddenly felt a hand on his wrist that pulled him into the space between the buildings. It startled him, and he yanked his arm back as he turned to face whoever was pulling on him.

Chapter Notes

An 8k word chapter? In my fanfiction? It's more likely than you think...

(I have a new username! But fear not! It is still me!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You were the one who asked me to wake you up, you can't get mad at me now—” A thump from upstairs made Ranboo jump. “Quit throwin' shit!” There was a muffled response that he couldn't quite hear, and then footsteps as Techno exited Philza's room. “*Wake us up an hour before dawn, he says, I want to get an early start, he says, I definitely won't do what I do every time you wake me up and throw a tantrum like a baby—*”

“I'm not a baby!” Phil shouted.

“Then stop acting like one!” Techno hollered back as he came around the bottom of the stairs. He stopped when he saw Ranboo standing in the kitchen, a frying pan in hand sizzling with

bacon. Ranboo raised his eyebrows. “He threw a pillow at me,” Techno said, as though Phil had just kicked a puppy. Ranboo blinked at him.

“Breakfast?” He asked, raising the pan slightly. Techno tipped his head back with a groan, but walked over and took a piece of bacon from the pan bare handed. “Careful, it’s—” he started to warn, but Techno had already put the whole piece in his mouth and was grabbing another. “Oh.”

“Tha’s good bacon,” he said, mouth full. Ranboo smiled, adding two more pieces to the pan.

“I’m making toast as well,” he said, and Techno hummed as he began rooting through a chest in the living room.

Ranboo had woken up the moment he heard Technoblade start to open the latch to the front door. He sat up fast enough that he hardly processed that he was awake, staring blankly around his room until his thoughts began to organize themselves in a functional manner. Techno announced himself when he entered, rummaging around the kitchen and lighting lanterns while Ranboo lit his own bedside lantern and checked his memory book.

It was still dark out, stars still visible in the sky. As he read, he remembered why Techno was there so early; they were making a trip to the east village. The thought made his stomach flip. He wasn’t afraid, really. From everything Phil had said about it, it certainly seemed the more welcoming of the two villages, and the one he and Techno were more fond of. That alone said a lot. It was more the thought of meeting new people— a whole village of new people.

He was certain he’d known other people before, of course; he knew how to read, write, speak. He had manners. He said please and thank you. He could cook. Those were things you learned, and things he doubted other Endermen could have taught him from what he knew of them. But he didn’t remember any of it, any faces or names or even the feeling of knowing, or being known. And with Phil and Techno, it was still different; it was like they’d met him before he met them, and he’d come into consciousness already aware of their presence. It was a weird thing to think back on. The memory was all blurry.

He wondered what sort of impression he’d give off. Would he have to shake hands? Answer questions? Would they be afraid?

Philza had given him a choice, obviously. He could go with him and Techno, or he could stay home alone. Going with them was nerve wracking, but staying home felt terrifying. He didn't trust himself enough anymore to be left by himself, so here he was, awake before the sun had even hinted at its presence on the horizon, making breakfast. He put the pan back on the stovetop to let the bacon cook further and turned to start slicing bread to toast in the oven.

The countertop was charred from the fire. They needed to go to the village to trade for supplies, to replace what they'd; cookware, spices, a new curtain, paint and plaster to fix the wall, hardwood to make a new cabinet, glass for the window (which had since been boarded up and covered with a tarp nailed to the outside). The list went on, and with it grew Ranboo's guilt at the whole ordeal.

He still hadn't told them anything, about standing in the kitchen or forgetting or the words he found in his book. And he wasn't sure if he was going to. He had started hiding his memory book, an act that only made him feel more like a liar. It was just until he could figure out a plan, that was all.

He blinked at the counter. He had been doing something, he knew it. It was right there, just out of reach. He furrowed his brow, glancing from item to item to see if it would jog his memory, but nothing felt right.

"You were making toast," Technoblade said, startling him out of his confusion.

"What?" Ranboo said, looking up. Techno turned back to the chest and continued pulling out clothes.

"Toast," he repeated. It clicked back into place. He shook his head, wondering how long he'd been standing there.

"Oh. Right... thank you," he said. "Toast," he repeated. Bread, knife, cutting board, oven. He said the steps to himself so they wouldn't be swept away. It was early. He was probably just tired.

As he was pulling the browned slices out of the oven, Phil trudged into the kitchen with his eyes half lidded, blonde hair sticking out in every direction. He looked miserable.

“Morning,” Ranboo greeted him. Phil looked over at him and raised his eyebrows.

“It sure is,” he muttered. Techno snorted. Ranboo stepped aside as Phil served himself breakfast.

“Water’s already on the stove,” Ranboo said. Phil crunched down on the toast and hummed, looking slightly less dejected.

“You’re too good to me,” he said, patting Ranboo on the shoulder. Ranboo chirped, and Phil smiled before going about making tea. “You could learn a thing or two, Techno.”

“You *told* me to wake you up,” Techno huffed. He stood, passing an armful of items into Ranboo’s hands which he struggled not to drop. Most of it appeared to be leather, thick and hardy with straps and buckles hanging off of the pieces. “Try all that on and see what fits,” Techno told him. “I don’t think the pants will work, but the rest should.”

“Armor?” Ranboo asked, adjusting the pile in his arms.

“It’s light, but a bit of protection goes a long way. I don’t think any of our iron stuff would fit you,” Techno explained.

“Oh, um...” He hadn’t expected to need armor. “Okay.”

“The woods can get dangerous, even in the daytime,” Techno said as though he’d read his mind. “We don’t usually have any problems, but you know. Better safe than sorry.” Ranboo nodded, and Techno walked over to the table to start putting on his own gear. It wasn’t the same black metal armor he wore on trips to the nether, but it still looked impressive.

Ranboo laid the pieces out on the couch. He could already tell the pants wouldn't fit. He doubted they'd even make it halfway down his calves, so he set them aside. What remained were two pairs of bracers, a set of greaves, and a leather chestpiece. Both of the bracers were too big, sliding around on his forearms no matter how tight he did the laces on one or the buckles on the other, and when Techno looked over he huffed, narrowing his eyes.

"You're still so skinny," he murmured, shaking his head as he looked back down to lace his boots, and Ranboo felt like he'd done something wrong. Techno paused as he finished the knot, reconsidering what he'd said. "Better than the skeleton you were a month ago, though, to be fair." Ranboo started taking off the bracers.

"I don't get cold as quick, now," he said, and Techno hummed. He examined his wrists and arms as he did. He'd put on weight, mostly thanks to Phil's constant efforts to pile more onto his plate or insist on second or third or fourth servings. When they worked, he or Techno would pass him an apple or a piece of bread every so often. It had become so normal that he'd forgotten it had a purpose, to get him stronger, healthier, less sickly looking. He put the bracers down.

He had a similar problem with the greaves, where no matter how much he tightened them around his shins, they slid around and ended up backwards or slid down around his heels.

"Let's get you measured for a set while we're there," Phil said. He'd finished his tea and was looking significantly more lively after doing so. He'd started preparing their packs for the trip. "Lara's a fantastic armorer, she made my set custom. I'm tricky 'cause of the wings," he said, rustling his feathers to emphasize his point. Ranboo really hadn't dwelled on it much, but now that he thought about it, most of Phil's shirts and coats were tailored to let his wings through some way or another.

"Can't go wrong with good leather armor," Techno added. Ranboo had learned from countless conversations that no matter how much he insisted he didn't want them to spend their time or efforts on things for him, his attempts to be as little work as possible were pointless. So, he didn't protest and just nodded along instead, earning a smile from Phil.

"I think the chestpiece will work," Ranboo said, reaching around his side to try to do up the buckles, a task which was proving harder than he thought both due to the angle and the length of his nails. He needed to cut them down soon— they were too sharp for his liking. He adjusted his angle and tried again, shifting the back forward slightly. The piece sat

comfortably around his chest, surprisingly well fitted to his shoulders, and the layered panels in the front and back didn't overlap as he'd expected them to. Techno breathed out a laugh.

"That was mine from a long time ago," he said, a hint of nostalgia in his voice. "Back when I lived in the Nether." Ranboo inspected it closer to find it did have some wear on it, scratches here and there and an indent on the left side of the chest, as well as a few scorch marks. The smell of old ash lingered on it, despite its age. "Here," Techno said, approaching Ranboo from the side, nudging his hands out of the way of the straps.

Ranboo lifted his arm slightly to let Techno work, looking away awkwardly as he felt the buckles tighten on his right side. Techno put a hand lightly on his shoulder to make him turn so he could do the left. He was strangely gentle. With the armor fitted snugly, he stood back and looked at Ranboo with his arms crossed. Eventually, he nodded.

"Fits," he said bluntly. "Wish you had a bit more on ya, but it'll do for now."

He turned and reached over to the table, picking up a long dagger and a sheath and holding it out. Ranboo just stared at it. The handle was dark black and polished, the hilt gold, the blade silver. Even in the dimly lit room, it glinted with light. He was frozen. Techno waved it closer to him, raising his eyebrows.

"Just a precaution. Go on, it won't bite," he said.

Coward.

He shook his head. There it was again. He'd been hearing it more often now, like a ringing in his ear. When it spoke, it felt so real, so present, but when it was quiet he wondered if it had even been there at all. He knew it was just in his head, but still, there was a growing feeling of dread in the back of Ranboo's mind the longer he looked at the dagger, the longer Techno held it out to him. *Go on.* He knew it wasn't a test, but it felt like one. Right now, he didn't trust himself enough to pass, and he didn't want to know what would happen if he failed.

"Take it."

Take it.

“No,” he said, the steadiness of his own voice surprising him. He shook his head, steeling his expression and shoving his paranoia back. “I... I’d rather not,” he said. “I feel like I’ll just end up hurting myself,” he said, trying to keep his tone lighthearted.

Techno pulled the blade fully from the sheath, turning it over in his hand before flipping it, catching it by the tip of the blade. Ranboo’s ears pinned back unintentionally.

“Just don’t grab the pointy part and you’ll be fine,” Techno said with a shrug. He should just take it, reach out and get it over with, turn the watchful eyes away from him. *So do it.* Ranboo’s eyes began to tremble, and he looked away. He couldn’t. He couldn’t be trusted right now.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Ranboo said quietly, picking his words carefully. Techno raised his eyebrows, but after a moment, he returned the blade to its sheath.

“Okay,” Techno said, his usual monotone giving away nothing about what he really felt about Ranboo’s refusal. He placed the blade back down on the table. Ranboo cursed himself for how much relief he felt at that. He needed to get a grip, calm down. He took a breath, forcing himself to look relaxed even if he didn’t feel it.

“Sorry,” he said, but Techno waved him off.

“Eh, we’ll set some time aside when we get back and I can show you how to use it,” he said casually before looking up and catching Ranboo’s gaze. “Nothin’ll get to you with me and Phil around, anyway.” The statement had weight to it. Ranboo could feel it linger for a moment before Phil cleared his throat.

“Bags are packed,” he said. “Did you already feed the cows, Techno?” Ranboo sat down to put on his boots, focusing on tying the laces so he could shake off the bitter feeling he had.

“Yep,” Techno said. “They were equally unhappy to be woken up.” Phil rolled his eyes. “Sun’s gonna start rising soon,” Techno said, looking out the window.

“We ought to head out, then,” Phil said. “Do you want to bring your book, Ranboo?” Ranboo looked up and shook his head. Opening the memory book with Phil and Techno around meant they might see the message he’d left himself about the fire. He wouldn’t risk it. “Right. Last check then, make sure you’ve got everything you want with you. We’re not turning around halfway.”

Techno picked up Phil’s hat from the coat rack and threw it to him. Phil put it on, his hair sticking out from underneath it. He wrapped a leather scabbard belt around his waist and slid a long, dark metal sword into the sheath. Techno grabbed his axe, Ranboo donned his cloak, and they headed out the door as the sun began to peek over the trees.

Ranboo’s stride was significantly longer than Phil or Techno’s, yet another reminder of how much taller than them he was, and he found himself having to take half steps or shuffle every few moments to slow himself down enough that he wouldn’t step on the back of Philza’s boot.

The benefit to slowing down was that he was able to take in the forest as he walked. Since arriving, he hadn’t ventured far from home, and he liked the comfort of a small world – the cabins, the barns, and the farms made up their little corner of the tundra, bordered by the lake shore and the forest – and for a while, the sight of the woods made him uneasy to put it lightly, so he hadn’t had much motivation to explore or ask to be shown the terrain. He didn’t regret that choice to stay close to home, but setting foot outside the confines of their homestead felt like stretching his legs.

Snow still clung to the needles of the evergreens around them. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the white dusting on every surface bounced the sunlight around almost blindingly, but Ranboo couldn’t help but continue to look around in awe. It was beautiful in the forest. He tried to pick out every detail he could, from the lines of animal tracks running through the snow to the little clumps of red berries hanging off of dense bushes beneath the trees. He hadn’t expected there to be so much color. Underneath one tree, he spotted movement,

something rustling the leaves of a bush there. Ranboo narrowed his eyes, hunching down to try to peer into the brush, but before he could figure out exactly what was hiding there, he was met with a facefull of pine needles and cold, fluffy snow. He jerked back, batting flakes off of his cheeks shaking out his hair. He heard a chuckle and found Phil looking back at him stifling his laughter.

“Watch where you’re going, mate,” Phil said, shaking his head with a smile, and Ranboo felt himself blush.

“I thought I saw something under a bush,” he said sheepishly.

“Probably a fox,” Technoblade said from his position at the front of their little line. “Was it orange?”

“I didn’t see,” Ranboo said.

“There’re a lot of them this time of year,” Phil said, looking over his shoulder to look at Ranboo. Ranboo hunched over so he wouldn’t have to crane his neck as much. “They like the sweet berries, that’s those red ones on the darker bushes. They’re edible for us too, actually.”

“Are they good?” Ranboo asked, and Phil shrugged.

“They’re too seedy for my taste,” he said, “but they’re good in a pinch. Good in jam, though. Maybe we’ll pick some on the way back.” Ranboo hummed, nodding.

“Are the foxes friendly?” he asked.

“Nah. They won’t attack you or anything, but they’ll run from you if you get too close,” Phil explained.

“It’s the wolves you gotta watch out for,” Techno said.

“Oh?”

“They don’t need much of an excuse to go after you,” he said. “Nasty bite. Don’t piss ‘em off.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Ranboo mumbled, looking around the forest a bit more cautiously. It sounded like he was speaking from experience. Ranboo wondered if there was anything Techno *didn’t* have experience with. He and Phil both seemed fairly well traveled. In his head, Ranboo knew what a wolf looked like, so he must have seen one at some point...

“Don’t worry, Techno’ll see a threat coming from a mile away,” Phil said, giving him a reassuring smile. Techno snorted. *Is that so?*

“Everything leaves a trace,” Techno shrugged. “Easy to spot once you know what you’re lookin’ for.”

“So no wolves around here?” Ranboo asked.

“They’re around, they’re just not nearby,” Techno said. That didn’t make him feel better. “Wolves shouldn’t be your main concern anyway.” That *certainly* didn’t make him feel better.

“Techno,” Phil scolded, and Techno just shrugged.

“You gotta know what’s out there. There’s a reason we don’t go out at night.”

“Mobs, right?” Ranboo asked. Phil and Techno both looked back at him. “I remember some of them, I think. And I’ve read about them in your books.” Techno nodded.

“There’s some you don’t have to worry about up here in the cold. Zombies just freeze over, and spiders only tend to hang out in caves, which I don’t think you’ll be going into any time soon,” Techno explained.

“Yeah, I’d rather not...” Ranboo said quietly.

“Skeletons are the main one you have to watch out for. I was pretty pissed to find out those weren’t just a Nether problem,” Techno scowled. “They’re much harder to spot against the snow, too.” Ranboo glanced out between the rows of trees.

“They’re in the Nether?”

“Unfortunately,” Techno said, shaking his head. “Remember that arrow I had sticking out of me when I came back from there a while back?”

“No,” Ranboo said.

“Right,” Techno mumbled. “Well, you get the gist. Skeleton, arrow, shoulder.” Ranboo nodded. “You end up with a lot of arrow holes living there. The piglins are worse, honestly. They’re much more fond of crossbows. And they hold grudges.”

Ranboo recognized the mob; that was Techno’s hybrid. He’d read about Piglins in a few of Techno and Phil’s books, and from what he understood, they were one of the few communal mobs in the world other than humans.

“But you...” Ranboo hesitated, cutting himself off, but the question had already stuck its foot in the door and Techno and Phil both had their attention on him now. “Um... you’re a Piglin hybrid, right?” Techno gave him a nod. “Why were they shooting at you, then?” A look passed over Techno’s face that Ranboo couldn’t quite place, something between bitterness and nostalgia, and he was quiet for a moment. Ranboo regretted asking. “Sorry,” he said, “You don’t have to answer that.” Techno shook his head.

“Nah, I don’t mind. It’s a good question. Most mobs tend to be loyal to their own, I guess Piglins are just loyal to an extreme. They’ve got a strong sense for outsiders, and even with the advantage of bein’ part Piglin, I was just a little too *off* to blend in.”

“So you didn’t live with them?” Ranboo asked.

“I did when I was a kid,” Techno said. “I looked more the part. Shorter, chubbier, you know. More... piggish,” he shrugged.

Ranboo wondered what Techno was like as a child. He got the sense that he’d lived an eventful life so far, that this was almost like a retirement from a more chaotic life.

“Piglins live like families. Everyone takes care of each other, share food, watch each other’s backs. They look out for their own.” Techno turned back to watch the path in front of him, and gestured with his hands while he spoke. “But once you stop lookin’ like family, it’s over. After that...” There was a heavy silence that settled among them, filled only by the crunching of snow. Techno sighed. “I almost didn’t make it out of there alive,” he said with a shrug, his voice far too nonchalant for what he’d just said.

Ranboo knew living in the Nether must have taken a toll on Techno, even if he didn’t mention it. He could see it in the way he was constantly watching his surroundings, the way he always faced towards an exit, or the way he was always aware even when he seemed to be invested in something else. He wondered if it was why he didn’t sleep. He wondered how many of the raised, white scars that littered Techno’s arms and neck and back were from the Nether, or how many were from his “family”. It made even more sense now why Techno didn’t trust him for so long.

“Oh,” Ranboo said softly. “How... how old were you then?”

“I dunno,” Techno said. “Young. Your age, maybe? Maybe a little younger.” Ranboo furrowed his brow. “But if it hadn’t happened, I never would have left. Never would have known anything else.”

“Never would have met *me*, what a tragedy that would’ve been,” Phil said, nudging Techno’s shoulder.

“You say it like a joke, but it’s true,” Techno said, looking back at Phil and smiling more softly than Ranboo remembered seeing him smile before. “Moving in with you was the best thing I ever did for myself.”

“Aw, mate,” Phil crooned.

“Don’t let it get to your head,” Techno muttered.

“Too late,” Phil said.

“You’re acting like I haven’t told you that a hundred times,” Techno said, rolling his eyes. Ranboo watched them bicker, aware once again of how much time Techno and Phil had spent together, how long they’d been each other’s family.

Jealous?

Ranboo’s ears flicked, and he kept his gaze focused forward. He had nothing to be jealous of. He was part of this now. It was his, too.

For how long, I wonder? Ranboo dug his nails into his palms. *How long do you think you can keep this up?*

Until he figured this out. Until he had a plan. Until then, he needed some peace and quiet. This voice was only in his head, anyway.

He took a breath. It was only in his head. He was in control. Right?

The question was met with silence.

Right.

Ranboo could hear the village before he saw it, voices drifting aimlessly into the trees punctuated by a laugh or a shout or a rooster's crow. As they got closer, he could see plumes of chimney smoke rising into the air. There were signs of life in the woods nearer to the village border, an axe stuck in a tree trunk, a stack of broken down building materials, or a sign nailed to a tree. As they approached, Phil craned his neck to look back at Ranboo.

"I told them a bit about you," he said. "So don't be too worried." Ranboo was fairly sure that nothing Phil said right now would do much to settle the feeling of unease he had in his stomach.

"What did you tell them?" Ranboo asked, wringing his hands together and holding them close to his chest. He watched as more and more bits of fence and buildings and cobblestone paths became visible through the trees.

"Eh, mostly that you're tall and weird looking," Phil said with a smirk. "Bit awkward."

"Thanks," Ranboo muttered, and Techno stifled a laugh. The edge of the village came into view at the end of the path through the woods. It consisted of small cobblestone and wood houses, some with porches or stairs leading up to them, each with a little stone chimney puffing out little clouds of smoke. There were metal lanterns on posts that stood on either side of the village entrance and dotted the paths and houses inside. People were milling around or working in fields, and Ranboo saw glimpses of children running through the pathways.

It was odd to see a space so populated. He'd gotten used to the quiet isolation of Phil and Techno's piece of the tundra. The only other noise they heard there aside from their own voices was the mooing of cows or the call of a bird overhead. Here, it sounded so alive. It

looked alive. It looked warm and inviting, with flower beds and rocking chairs on front porches and villagers gossiping to each other by some secluded fence.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Phil noted. Ranboo nodded, a slight smile growing subconsciously on his face. It was more welcoming than he’d expected.

As they approached, a few villagers noted their presence. Some let their gaze linger, others waved and smiled. One woman came to the border of the fence and smiled as they approached. She had curly brown hair with a few strands of silver littered here and there, and when she smiled, wrinkles gathered at the corners of her eyes and along her cheeks.

“Maria,” Phil greeted her with a grin.

“Hello Phil,” she said. Her voice had something musical about it. “Techno,” she nodded his way.

“Hello Maria,” Techno said, his voice suddenly far more formal than Ranboo had heard it before.

“Been far too long since we’ve seen you,” Maria tutted. “Lila was convinced you were avoiding her because of how she knotted your hair last time.”

“It did take a while to get out,” Techno mumbled, but Maria had already turned her full attention toward Ranboo. Her gaze was sharp and intentful, and it made his ears pin back and his tail curl around his ankle as he waited for her assessment of him.

“You must be Ranboo, then?” She asked.

Ranboo darted his gaze down to Phil before he looked back to her and nodded. She stepped closer, and Ranboo stiffened. She was very short. He had to tuck his chin to look down at her, and she craned her neck to look up at him.

“You didn’t lie when you said he was tall,” she said, turning to Phil, who simply shrugged. She looked back to Ranboo. “Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Ranboo,” she said, reaching out an arm to pat him gently on the arm. Ranboo felt some of the tension leave his body. That was it? “The children have been very curious about you, you know,” she said, turning to walk them into the village. The three of them followed behind her. Phil caught Ranboo’s eye and winked at him. “They might invade your personal space a bit, fair warning.”

“They’re very hands-on,” Techno agreed solemnly.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. They’re curious. Not much interesting happens around here for them to get excited about,” Maria scolded.

“I don’t think of myself as particularly excitin—” Techno cut himself off, and Ranboo turned to see Techno holding a small girl at arms length who looked immeasurably shocked to have been stopped so suddenly.

“I was gonna surprise you!” she pouted.

“Consider me surprised,” Techno said, and the girl pushed his hand away grumpily. The expression faded quickly into joy, though, and she bounced on her toes and looked up at Techno, grinning.

“I learned a new braid,” she said, and Techno raised an eyebrow. “Amy taught me! Makes the bumps stay on the outside,” she made a gesture with her hands that did nothing to make sense of her description, but Techno nodded knowingly nonetheless. She caught sight of Ranboo and dropped her hands, peering at him before looking back up to Techno. “Is he the weird one?” She asked.

“Lila!” Another voice scolded. A woman approached them, her face embarrassed. Ranboo assumed it was the girl’s mother. There was a young boy at her heels.

“Sorry!” Lila said quickly. She turned to Ranboo. “Sorry,” she said again, and he couldn’t help but smile at her.

“I promise I told them more about you than just *weird* and *tall*, ” Phil said sheepishly.

“He said you’ve got a tail,” the boy said. “How’s that work? Do you control it?” He leaned to the side to watch Ranboo’s tail as it flicked anxiously. “Can you feel it?” Ranboo opened his mouth to answer, but was cut off. “Do you ever trip on it? *Can it grab things?*” Ranboo blinked at him.

“I, uh... I’ve never tried?” he said.

“That’s the first thing I’d try if I had a tail,” the boy said, crossing his arms. Ranboo didn’t know how to respond to that. Luckily, Maria saved him.

“Ranboo, this is my son, Emmett, and that’s Lila, and Lila’s mother Annika,” she explained. Ranboo repeated their names in his head, entirely unconfident in his ability to remember them. Annika nodded at him, and he awkwardly nodded back.

“Phil’s mentioned you,” Annika said, her expression softening. Behind her, Lila had begun tugging on Techno’s hand, trying to lead him away. With a dramatic roll of his eyes, he gave one last look to Phil and Ranboo before letting himself be toted off toward a small crowd of other children Lila’s age. “I run the mill with my husband, Hector,” she said, gesturing to a tall structure in the far corner of the village with white rotors that spun slowly.

“N-nice to meet you,” Ranboo said, nodding again.

“Annika’s sister, Amaly, is a baker. She’s the one who makes those pumpkin pastries that Techno so adores,” Maria said. “And Amaly’s son Clayton is apprenticing under *my* daughter-in-law Lara learning leatherwork.” The names were beginning to get jumbled. Ranboo looked to Philza for some help, but Phil just raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders, which wasn’t helpful in the slightest. “She works right over here, actually, come! I’ll introduce you!” Maria had already started walking off toward a building down the path,

and Ranboo looked to her, then back to Phil, beginning to walk after her hesitantly. Phil reached out and grabbed the shoulder of Ranboo's pack, pulling it off of his shoulders.

"You go explore, meet everyone. I'm going to get started shopping around a bit," he said. "You'll be fine," he said, interjecting before Ranboo could open his mouth to protest. "Just smile and nod. Maria will do all the talking, anyways," he said with a smirk, and with that, he patted Ranboo on the shoulder and walked off. Ranboo cast one more look back over to Technoblade, who had been swarmed by a trio of girls that had started plaiting his hair, before turning to catch up to Maria. Emmett followed close behind.

When they got to Lara's workshop, Phil proved to be right in his assumption that Maria would do all the talking. Ranboo hardly got more than a "hello" in before she was telling him all about Lara and her work and Clayton's apprenticeship. While she spoke, reciting a story about how one of Lara's chest plates saved a man's life while boar hunting, Lara got to work measuring Ranboo for a set. Ranboo felt a bit like a doll, but it wasn't terrible if he was being honest. He got to stand still and avoid talking, and Lara gave him instructions on how to stand and bend and where to hold the tape measure so she could get the right dimensions.

While Maria stopped talking at them for a moment to explain to Emmett how leather was made, Lara asked him how he liked the piece he currently had on, or if he'd prefer a different style, a question to which Ranboo had absolutely no idea the answer.

"Dealer's choice?" She asked, and Ranboo nodded sheepishly. "You're an easy man to please," she said with a smile.

"Yes, Phil said you've been a joy to have around," Maria said, turning her attention back to Ranboo. Before he could even start to react, she'd already started asking questions about the farms and the animals, and again, and she went on to tell him about the village farms and animals instead of waiting for him to answer the questions she'd posed. As soon as Lara was done measuring him, Maria was already dragging him on through the village, making every stop she could and introducing him to everyone she laid her eyes on; baker, toolsmith, butcher, mason, farmers, shepherds. There were older villagers sitting on their porches or out for a walk, kids running through the streets or doing chores, and all sorts of people in between. Ranboo had no chance at remembering their names. He almost forgot Maria's already.

Phil hadn't told him so many people lived here. The word "village" had struck him as meaning... well, something smaller. But he hadn't been wrong about them being friendly, or friendly enough. No one had outright avoided him, though a lot of them weren't too interested in sticking around and chatting all day. Maria had them moving through fast enough for that not to matter very much, though. The only true shock was when they rounded a corner to see the most massive creature he ever remembered seeing.

It was taller than Ranboo, which was saying something, with a huge blocky frame made up of what appeared to be iron. He wondered if it was metal through and through, or if it was a shell, like a bug. Its steps thudded hard against the ground and it creaked like a rusty hinge. Ranboo froze, ears pinning back and tail wrapped tight around his ankle. It stopped, too, staring at him dark red eyes boring into his skull. Maria noticed he stopped and turned back to him.

"Don't mind him," she said. "I take it you've never seen an Iron Golem before?" Ranboo mustered the willpower to shake his head. "He's just here to protect the village, make sure we don't have any trouble from the outside."

"Oh," Ranboo said softly. Behind him, his tail slowly unwrapped, flicking lightly as he observed the golem. It didn't seem to be angry with him, at least. But the way it stared made his skin crawl. It had arms like clubs.

"He's just watching you because you're new, he won't bother you. We call him Warden." Ranboo nodded slowly.

"He's fun to climb on," Emmett piped up.

"You'll fall on your head one day sitting on his shoulders," Maria scolded. "Come on, we're headed this way to the shops." She was already walking off again. Ranboo cast one last look towards the golem before catching up, not wanting to be left alone with it for long.

After spending some time here, he felt a bit less on edge than at first. Frankly, it seemed the expectations for him to really interact with everyone were low. He wondered how much he had Phil to thank for that. He didn't mind being called weird. It made him feel less like he had to perform, blend in, act normal. Maria stopped at a stall with a woman who had set out some jewelry to sell and was fully engrossed in her conversation so much so that even

Emmett got bored and wandered off. Ranboo decided to do the same, tentatively walking around to the different stores and stalls, looking through windows and getting a closer look at different things to buy. Maria had said it was a sort of yard sale, that at the end of every two weeks merchants would set out everything they wanted to clear out. It was good timing for their visit.

While Ranboo was walking from one store to the next, he suddenly felt a hand on his wrist that pulled him into the space between the buildings. It startled him, and he yanked his arm back as he turned to face whoever was pulling on him.

It was a kid. He looked young, but Ranboo wasn't good at guessing ages. He looked up at Ranboo nearly expressionless, but his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"It's just me, don't worry," he said as though Ranboo was supposed to recognize him.

Was this one of the children he'd met? He hoped he hadn't already forgotten someone's face so soon.

"I didn't know if you'd come back," he said. "But then Mr. Philza started talking about you. I'm glad you found him and Mr. Technoblade, I was worried you'd... well, you look better now."

There was a pit forming in Ranboo's throat, a sharp, dense feeling that only built as the boy talked. He desperately tried to put the story together from what he was being told. He'd been here before? When? No one else recognized him, so why did this kid? It had been before Phil and Techno found him, which meant this kid knew more about Ranboo's past than anyone else. But something made his stomach churn.

"But I kept it safe, I didn't tell anyone," the boy continued. "Do you want it back? Is that why you came?"

Ranboo felt numb. His fingers tingled. He felt the need to lie, to go along with this despite his confusion. Something told him he needed to find out more, to spy, to pretend to be himself.

He nodded, but it was like something else was commanding his movement. The boy nodded back intently.

“This way,” he said. Ranboo’s felt like his feet were moving on their own accord. The boy took his hand, his small fingers wrapping around Ranboo’s, and led him through the narrow alleys between houses. “I didn’t read it, just like you said,” he continued. “I buried it under our neighbor’s flowers, cus they never water them.” The boy looked back at Ranboo and stopped, examining his face closely. “You don’t remember.”

“I—” Clearly he wasn’t as good at pretending as he thought. “I don’t—”

“Phil said you had memory problems,” he said. Ranboo hesitated for a moment, but nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Um. Okay. You don’t remember anything?” Ranboo shook his head. “Okay. Well, you— er...” the boy paused, trying to figure out where to start, and Ranboo hung onto every sound in anticipation. “My name is Ilya,” he said finally.

He waited a moment, maybe to see if it rang a bell. it didn’t. He continued.

“We met a while ago, I’m not sure how long. Before you were with Mr. Philza.” Ilya tugged at his hand and talked as they kept walking, looking around every so often to make sure there was no one else listening. “But these weird noises woke me up, and I snuck out the window to go see, and then I met you in the woods, and you were all—”

Ilya made a gesture with his other hand and a noise with his mouth that sounded kind of like an explosion, but it got the point across.

“You were talking to someone but you kinda snapped out of it when you saw me. And honestly you scared the crap out of me. No offense. But you looked— anyway. And then you gave me the book. Well you threw it at me actually. Or you threw it, and it landed near me, so I picked it up. And you told me to hide it, and never open it.”

Ranboo’s mind was reeling. He had a million questions, and no idea where to start. It was like meeting someone from a past life, someone who knew him, but a different version of him. A version no one else knew. A version that he and Phil and Techno had been searching

for. He wanted to know how long ago this was exactly, what he looked like, which direction he'd come from, what he'd said, who he'd been talking to. He wasn't even sure he could speak right now even if he wanted to. There was a second book. Or a first book. So his book was the second book? Maybe that's why it felt so natural to write everything down.

"This way," Ilya said, snapping him out of his thoughts. They were far from anyone else, at the far end of the village from where they'd come in. It was quiet. Ilya let go of Ranboo's hand, and he felt cold and ungrounded. He walked over to a flowerbed that was mostly just dirt and dead leaves and started sticking his hands into the dirt, shoveling aside the frozen earth until he uncovered a burlap bag. He tugged it out of the ground, stood up, and pulled out a book from inside.

Ranboo felt like he'd been hit by a bucket of ice water, a sudden cold settling over him.

The book was old and worn, with a cracked and wrinkled leather cover that was peeling away at the corners. There was a sort of spiral design etched on the cover that made him feel *something*, but he couldn't place it no matter how hard he searched for the feeling. Ilya held the book out to him, and there was a long space of time before Ranboo reached out to take it.

"What's in it?" Ilya asked quietly, like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to speak. Ranboo looked at him to find him staring at him intently. He looked back down at the book, running his thumb down the spine. It felt familiar.

"I don't remember," Ranboo said. It was mostly true. He felt... he didn't know. He felt like something was there, like there was a memory waiting for him, something trapped under the ice just waiting for him to break through. But it was there.

"Are you... are you going to open it? I won't read over your shoulder, I promise," he said.

He thought he'd be more hesitant. He thought he'd be scared. Despite the situation, despite the uncertainty, the secrets, the forgotten past, he wasn't afraid. He wanted to know. He wanted to know *so bad*. Now he had answers in the palm of his hand. This was the key. This could explain why he was...

He opened the book before he could second guess himself.

He felt Ilya watching him as he did. He flipped open the cover and the first page opened with it. On it, there was a short note addressed to him:

Ranboo,

I'm sorry. I should have done more. I don't expect you to forgive me, but whatever happens, know that it isn't your fault.

Run, and keep running. Run until you're safe.

Ranboo blinked at the page. He'd read this before. He knew the words almost before he read them, like he'd read them a thousand times. Forgotten them a thousand times. The rest of the page was empty, just blank space. There was nothing else from the writer of the note, not even a signature.

He turned the page. The next was in his own handwriting, a shaky, frantic scrawl of words; his name, over and over and over again, descriptions of the environment, plants, trees, rocks, an account of finding his own footprints over and over again, going in circles.

The environment he was describing was nothing like anything Ranboo had ever seen in the overworld. He wrote about dense blue and green trees, glowing lights in the sky, a world where time stood still. That must have been the Nether. So he *had* been there before.

He continued to flip through. The pages were nonsense that slowly became more structured, more coherent. The writing slowly transitioned to short, incomplete ideas, sentences about where he'd been or what direction he was walking in, or feelings he had, fear and panic and confusion. It was like watching someone learn to become a person again.

Something had happened, something that the person at the beginning was apologizing for. Were they the one that did this to him? Made him forget?

For a while, his writing became organized. There were entries, logs of what he'd done, what he'd eaten, where he'd been. He had tracked time using his claw length. He had symbols that meant different things; danger, food, shelter, *you've been here before* .

Then, it became frantic. Pages were torn out. Notes in the margins looked hauntingly familiar to the notes in his current memory book. Entire pages were scratched over, torn to shreds, burned. It was like he was hiding something from himself. Or something else was hiding things from *him*.

He needed to track this backwards, figure out where he ended and work his way back to the start. He flipped through faster and faster, ignoring the panicked transcriptions of dreams and the pages of repeated sentences and the passages where he had tried to convince himself he was in control, *you think you're in control?*

He should stop. He needed to stop. Stop turning pages. Find Phil, find Techno, go home, tell the truth, stop turning pages, stop reading, *coward*. They were chaotic, some neat, some destroyed, and each one he flipped past felt like running, like he was putting one foot in front of the other, constantly keeping himself from falling, *keep going*, until he finally landed on one that was entirely different from the rest.

Perfect.

Across two pages, drawn neatly and with repetitive precision, were hundreds of tiny smiles. The next page was the same. And the next, and the next. They got messier, bigger, darker, smudged, tearing through multiple pages. There was something wet on his hands now. It was leaking from between the pages, welling up from the spine, sticky and black and dripping slow like syrup. It bubbled up from the charcoal drawings, welling up like tears.

It was slowly dawning on him how terrible of a mistake he'd just made. He didn't want to do this again. Not here. Not anymore.

“Ranboo?” Ilya sounded like he was underwater. “What’s wrong?”

He felt a hand on his shoulder. From behind him, Dream laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience and also sorry for the longer time between posting - hope it was worth the wait!!

Also also thanks for all the amazing comments! Much love :')

Also also also, I'm gonna use these end notes to post some updates as I write the next chapters, so if you want to see how its going or how soon the next one will be out, check back here and I'll have some updates for ya :)

Now go drink some water owo

6/7 - I love that the comments so far are mostly "OH NO" or "fuck you," brings me great joy

6/7 again – im literally already working on the next chapter, y'all hyped me up too much and now im on a roll

6/8 - I've got most of the next chap written! Will be editing, probably posting tomorrow or the next day 0.0

The Liar

Chapter Summary

"You think they'll save you?"

He clenched his eyes shut, shaking his head harder, but when he closed his eyes he still saw. The world stayed the same, just as dead, just as abandoned. He couldn't shut it out anymore. He couldn't speak. He wanted to scream. There was a howl building at the base of his skull.

His hands began to shake.

"You think they'll stay by your side? After what you've done?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hello, Ranboo.

The village was grey. The sun had disappeared, the pale blue sky replaced by a blank, dull sheet of clouds. The grass had died, flowers wilted, wood rotted. Where there were once windows, now there were cobwebs and sharp, jagged edges of broken glass. Cobblestone pillars lay toppled. There was no life here.

Ranboo had his hands open in front of him, palms up, empty. There was no sound. No birds, no wind. It was like there wasn't even air. He wasn't even sure if he was breathing.

Even knowing what to expect, Dream's appearance made his stomach turn. As the creature let its clawed hand scratch a trail down his arm, it made its way around, facing him head on with that sickening smile carved into its face. Ranboo stared at it. It tilted its head.

We do this every time, Ranboo. There was a buzz in his ears. The voice spoke directly into his head. He hated it. *Breathe.*

He did.

Better.

“You can’t be here,” Ranboo said. The sound of his own voice startled him. It was crisp, punctuated.

Oh? Dream’s head tilted on its axis. It straightened its spine. Its bones cracked as it did. Awfully bold today, aren’t we? Why’s that?

“You can’t. I won’t... I won’t put them in danger.”

Who? We’re here alone, see? Ranboo looked around. Everything looked dead. *There’s no danger.* Dream leaned in close, and it took every morsel of courage Ranboo had not to close his eyes or flee like a child. *Just you and me.* No, it was wrong. He knew there were others. He had been... they were here. Weren’t they?

“Stop it.” He felt himself begin to forget. He couldn’t stop it. The thing that stood in front of him filled him with terror so deep he felt it in his bones. Dream pulled its face away.

You really are a coward, aren’t you? Ranboo clenched his teeth. *I wish you wouldn’t fear me so much, Ranboo. After all I’ve done to help you.*

“After all you’ve—” Ranboo started, frustration beginning to bubble in his chest, but when he blinked, Dream wasn’t standing in front of him anymore. Or, it was still Dream – he recognized it somehow, but it was different.

Human.

Is this better?

It was a man, now. Tall, lean, disturbingly normal. Entirely ordinary. He wore simple clothes, a dark green cloak. He carried no sword, no weapon. He had dark blonde hair, a thin mouth. On his face was a mask, stark white. It was carved with that same smile.

“You seem to dislike my true form,” Dream said. It had a voice. *He* had a voice. It wasn’t ringing in the back of Ranboo’s skull this time; now, it was carrying across the space in between them. “I hate to see you so afraid.”

Ranboo blinked. In the time it took to notice the change, his mind had gone blank. He felt like his consciousness existed in a void, nothing before, only the moment, only *now*. He searched for a memory, for something to hold on to, but the village around them held no answers.

“Stop it,” he said.

“What?” Dream asked. His voice sounded too real now, too genuine. Ranboo shook his head. There was something just beyond this veil, something he was blocked off from. He recognized this place, but now the memories were gone. Why were they here? Why were they alone? Why did he feel like he wasn’t alone before?

“Give them back,” Ranboo said. “I can’t—”

“You’re still so convinced this is my doing, aren’t you?” Dream asked, cutting him off with a shake of his head. “That I’m making you forget?” Ranboo opened his mouth to answer, but Dream continued. “I’m trying to help you remember, Ranboo.”

“That’s what you’re doing then? That’s why you’re doing this? To get me to remember something?” He felt like he was so close to an answer. “I don’t understand what you want from me,” he said, his voice quiet.

“Ranboo, what *exactly* do you think I’m doing?” The way he spoke was infuriating. It was too calm, casual, knowing. He just wanted to *know*.

“I don’t know,” Ranboo said, digging his nails into his palms. He couldn’t feel it. He couldn’t feel anything here. “Every time I forget, I know it’s *you* I’m forgetting. I can feel it.”

“It’s as inconvenient for me as it is for you—”

“*Inconvenient?*” Ranboo said, his anger building.

“I’ve already told you I’m not the one messing with your memories,” Dream said with a shrug. Ranboo’s ears began to ring. “We want the same thing, Ranboo. We want information.”

“There’s no *we*, ” Ranboo hissed.

“I’m only trying to help—”

“Just tell me what you want,” Ranboo said. It was a demand. He hadn’t intended to make a demand, and yet there it was, hanging in the air between them. Dream slowly lowered his shoulders, staring blankly at Ranboo. He felt cold. Coiled. After a moment, Dream sighed.

“You won’t remember anyway,” Dream said. “It doesn’t matter what I tell you. He has you hidden too well.”

“Who?” Ranboo asked. He leaned forward, hanging off of every word, but Dream waved him off, turning to look around the village with infuriating apathy.

“What’s it matter to you? You’ve already forgotten. Those memories are gone forever, abandoned. Just like you.”

“You’re a liar,” Ranboo said. He didn’t know why he said it. He didn’t even know if he believed it. It didn’t matter. Dream snapped his head back to look at him. The ringing in his ears grew louder.

“Choose your next words carefully,” Dream warned. The threat didn’t make him afraid. It filled him with rage, with resentment. He was tired of this.

“You’re not real,” Ranboo bristled. He felt his hair stand on end. “I’m done doing this. You’re a liar, and you’re not real.” He willed it to be true. This was in his head. It was only in his head, and he was in control. He had to be in control. It had to be fake. The world around him pulsed.

“Are you sure that’s how you want to speak to me?” The ringing was turning into a scream. “I’m the only one on your side, now—” It wasn’t true. Whatever was hidden from him, whatever was lost, it was still there somewhere. He needed to get out.

“Stop, stop *talking* ! I’m done listening to you!” He was in control. “You’re not real, you’re *nothing*— ”

YOU THINK I’M NOTHING?

The force of the voice felt like a nail through his skull. He clamped his hands over his ears, his eyes watering. The sky above them darkened. The human Dream was gone, replaced by the nightmarish creature once again. It towered over him, and suddenly he felt like something was pulling him to the ground, weighing his bones down and clawing him down to his grave.

You are nothing but a weak, pitiful child, a means to an end.

Dream leaned in, stepping closer, closing the distance between them. Ranboo squeezed his eyes shut, but its voice only grew louder.

I would have killed you the moment I laid eyes on you if you weren't such an unfortunately necessary vessel.

It felt like his head was splitting.

And when you've served your purpose, when you free me from this wretched, detestable place...

I'll massacre you like the rest of them.

The silence returned to the village, but the sudden quiet was just as deafening. He felt something cold and sharp under his chin, tilting his head up. It was sickeningly gentle. He opened his quaking eyes, staring into the dark void of Dream's smile. He didn't dare breathe. It's voice was a whisper. A promise.

I'll come for you first.

It stepped back, bones cracking as it did. Wind began to float through the village, kicking up dead leaves and dirt.

Endermen are such stubborn creatures, Ranboo. You have an annoyingly vital instinct for self preservation. It's exactly what I need from you, and yet it's the only thing keeping you safe.

He felt like the air was slowly being pulled from the world around him, swept up into this new storm. He could only shake his head.

No? You don't think so?

He felt himself beginning to tremble. He wanted to wake up. He wanted to go home. He wanted Phil. He wanted Techno.

You think they'll save you?

He clenched his eyes shut, shaking his head harder, but when he closed his eyes he still saw. The world stayed the same, just as dead, just as abandoned. He couldn't shut it out anymore. He couldn't speak. He wanted to scream. There was a howl building at the base of his skull.

His hands began to shake.

You think they'll stay by your side? After what you've done?

He saw blood pooling under his fingernails. Not his. Red blood.

Human blood.

You're mine.

A numbness fell over him.

You'll stay.

Dream's voice was dizzying. He needed to wake up. He needed to escape. He felt something calling to him, something important, something that he could almost hear, almost feel. Help. He needed help.

Stay.

Something crunched in his grip, but there was nothing in his hands.

STAY.

Pain bloomed across his chest. The world around him flickered. He heard breaking wood like it was right underneath him.

I'll keep you safe.

When Dream spoke, it was soft, gentle. It sounded genuine. He hated it. He began to see small specks of light, purple and black, particles beginning to swirl around him. The pain in his chest was different now, piercing, like a sword through his heart. This was wrong. Something was wrong. There was blood on his hands, under his nails. He needed to wake up. Something touched him. It burned. Wake up. Wake *up*. This was wrong.

Dream placed its claws over his chest, its boney, pale palm resting gently against him, and it felt like his heart was being ripped from between his ribs, pulled toward oblivion. The world pulsed like it was living.

He closed his eyes, but the world still remained. He covered his face with his hands. The particles still remained. He needed to do more. It wasn't enough.

He dug his nails in, and saw light.

Chapter End Notes

First, >:)

Now that that's out of the way, an important note - I've added the "Graphic Depictions of Violence" warning to this fic. Make of that what you will...

Also, thank you all SO SO MUCH for the HUGE amount of feedback I got on the last chapter. Every single comment was read and appreciated, your comments give me life and I'm so happy to see so many people enjoying (or hating) this fic!!

As in the last chapter, I'll post updates on how the next chapter is going here in this end note as I write it – in the meantime, drink water, pet a dog, touch grass :)))

6/9 - here's an update same day i posted this chap, im already working on the next chapter :) I won't leave yall hanging for too long...

6/11 – the next chapter is uh,,, much longer than this one. So it's gonna take a little longer! Not crazy long hopefully. Still in the works.

6/12 - okay so i found like 3 big plot holes in the planning of the remainder of this fic, and it's taken me like two whole days to fix them, but now i've got them fixed and i'm back to work on the next chap :D

6/15 - ooooo i'm gettin there. Editing.....

The Fool

Chapter Summary

“Ranboo,” Phil said. Even trying to raise his voice over the howl, he somehow made his voice gentle. Phil could shake him out of this trance. He’d done it before. “Ranboo, listen—” Phil shot a glance toward Techno, but turned back to Ranboo before Techno could understand what the look meant. “You need to let go. Can you hear me?” Phil was stepping closer, but the sound remained. “Ranboo.” Phil spoke with more conviction this time, saying the name like a command.

It felt wrong for Ranboo’s name to sound so harsh, but it seemed to break through to him. For the first time since it began, the sound began to die down, quieting slightly. Ranboo’s ears twitched, his tail slowing from its anxious thrash. His grip didn’t loosen. From where Techno stood, he could see small drops of blood welling up from under Ranboo’s claws.

Chapter Notes

A reminder if you haven't seen it, this whole fic has now been tagged with the warning "Graphic Depictions of Violence."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Technoblade was mid-sentence when he realized what the sound was. He hadn’t noticed it at first, or hadn’t registered it. A faint buzz that faded into the conversations of the villagers, a sound that could have been wind or laughter or an iron worker’s furnace. He was discussing a trade with one of the farmers – several small pouches of spices and two neatly wrapped bags of dry tea leaves for half a potato sack of bonemeal fertilizer – when the sound began to grow, like an itch at the base of his skull, a low sound that felt like cracking a joint.

If he’d been paying attention, he would have recognized it sooner. It was only when the sound became layered, still quiet, but combining with the static into a higher, more strained wail, that Techno finally jerked to attention. He scanned the open space around him in the village center, eyes narrowed, ears pricked as the tiny sound began to grow.

“Tech—?” the farmer began, but Techno held up a hand, cutting him off. The sound was building. He didn’t want it to be what he thought it was. He held his breath, waiting. “What’s that noise?” the farmer asked quietly. *Damn it.*

“Phil!” Techno shouted, whipping his head around to where the man stood, smiling as he chatted casually with Amaly outside her bakery. When Techno called his name, he looked over his shoulder casually, but his face fell as he began to take note of the howl. It was getting louder quickly, and other villagers were beginning to look up from their tasks to search for the source.

“Ranboo,” Phil said, panic lacing his voice.

Almost as soon as he said it, they heard a scream that made Techno’s stomach drop, desperate, a child’s call for his mother.

“*MOM!*” It was Ilya. Techno rarely heard his voice, but even so he recognized it immediately. “Philza! Mom!” Phil dropped what he was holding, letting his bag fall to the ground and already launching himself into the air. Techno dropped the spices and tea unceremoniously onto the farmer’s stand and took off running in the direction of the scream.

Above him, he saw Phil scanning the streets, weaving through the air before he spotted something and nosedived down to the ground at the back of the village. As Techno ran, he was aware of others following him, finding their way through the houses and streets. Ilya’s mother, Rose, was on his heels. The howl grew. Techno felt a chill, anticipating the worst but hoping for the best. He hoped Ranboo was just panicking about something, overwhelmed, maybe he’d spilled water on himself. Something easy. Something that could be dealt with.

“...don’t know, he just went all quiet and- and I was gonna go get you, but then he grabbed me and started making this sound and— ow Ranboo, let go!”

Ilya was grasping at Ranboo’s hand where it was wrapped around Ilya’s forearm, his claws digging into the boy’s skin, trying to pry the fingers off. Ranboo held Ilya with one hand, and in his other he clutched a leather book, one that looked different from his memory book. His eyes stared straight ahead, gaze blank and unseeing as he stared straight past Ilya. He was tense, his shoulders hunched and ears pinned back, and his tail was thrashing behind him like a whip. Phil was approaching like he was trying to calm a scared animal. When he saw

Techno and the villagers coming up on them from between the houses and streets, he held his hand out to tell them to keep their space.

“Ilya!” Rose called out, lurching forward towards them. Techno held his arm out, blocking her, and she stared daggers at him.

“It’s okay, Rose,” Phil called to her. “Ilya—”

“He’s hurting me!” Ilya said, his voice trembling. He looked afraid. Techno watched Ranboo closely. The kid had no expression on his face, eyes unmoving, but it was clear his jaw was clenched hard. The muscles in his neck were strained. Techno couldn’t tell if he was breathing.

The howl only grew louder. Techno remembered the howl they had heard in the forest when they’d found Ranboo. This one felt similar, but not quite the same. It was harsh, guttural, dissonant. Phil moved his outstretched hand to face Ilya and Ranboo now.

“I know, it’s okay, just—”

“Phil, make him let go. Ranboo!” Rose shouted, her voice cutting through the sound like a knife.

“Rose just— it’s okay, he’s not dangerous,” Phil said, and he wanted to believe it, he was willing it to be true, but Techno could see his panic growing. It was subtle, but it was there. Rose was grasping at Techno’s arm with one hand digging her nails in just like Ranboo was digging into Ilya. Techno looked toward the other villagers who had gathered, each of their faces plastered with fear or anger or worry. Some of them had grabbed makeshift weapons, a shovel or woodcutting axe or walking stick.

Techno felt like the moment hadn’t processed yet. It was like watching through someone else’s eyes, uninvolved, unfeeling. The creature in front of him didn’t feel like Ranboo. It felt unfamiliar. It was something fearsome, something that had made a whole village go from calm to chaos in seconds. He could see the worry in Phil’s eyes, concerned but trying to keep calm, but the blank stare that Ranboo had made Techno freeze in his tracks.

Ilya yanked back, trying to wrench himself free from Ranboo's grip, but Ranboo remained in place like Ilya's attempt was nothing more than a gust of wind. His howl pitched upward, making Techno's ears ring. Ilya put his free hand to his ear, ducking his head to block the other against his shoulder. He saw Phil wince.

"Ranboo," Phil said. Even trying to raise his voice over the howl, he somehow made his voice gentle. Phil could shake him out of this trance. He'd done it before. "Ranboo, listen—" Phil shot a glance toward Techno, but turned back to Ranboo before Techno could understand what the look meant. "You need to let go. Can you hear me?" Phil was stepping closer, but the sound remained. "Ranboo." Phil spoke with more conviction this time, saying the name like a command.

It felt wrong for Ranboo's name to sound so harsh, but it seemed to break through to him. For the first time since it began, the sound began to die down, quieting slightly. Ranboo's ears twitched, his tail slowing from its anxious thrash. His grip didn't loosen. From where Techno stood, he could see small drops of blood welling up from under Ranboo's claws. Ilya was pale with fear. *He's not dangerous.* Phil's promise to Rose echoed in his thoughts, but it felt wrong. With each sluggish drop of blood that was drawn up by Ranboo's grasp, with each moment Ranboo's face seemed unrecognizable, it felt more and more like a lie.

From the corner of his eye, Techno saw movement, a slight glint of metal.

"Phil..." he warned. Warden was rounding the corner several houses down, its metal limbs groaning and creaking as it slowly approached. Phil turned, looking to see what Techno was staring at. He swallowed hard, turning back to Ranboo.

"Ranboo, it's Phil. I need you to wake up." The sound was still quieting slowly, steadily, dulling the buzz in the air. Rose's grasp on Techno's arm tightened. Phil reached toward Ranboo, hesitating for a moment. Ranboo made no reaction. Phil rested one hand gingerly on Ilya's shoulder and the other on Ranboo's arm.

The howl cut off abruptly. Ranboo's slowly lifted his head, meeting Phil's gaze. Something flickered in his eyes, his expression changing slightly, shifting from that blank stare into something familiar. Something Techno recognized.

He'd had the same look when he'd come back to himself after losing his thoughts, or when he'd woken up after sticking his hand in the bucket of water, or when they'd found him in the woods. It was confusion. It was fear. It was concern.

It was an expression Techno recognized, one that made him step forward, one that made him want to act. To help. To do *something* to get his kid back.

"Ranboo?" Phil said, his voice quiet, hopeful. Ranboo held his gaze. His eyes seemed to flicker, passing back and forth between blank unknowing and concerned recognition. "Hey," Phil said, trying to draw him back, to lure Ranboo's consciousness back to the surface. "It's okay." Ranboo blinked at him. Techno clenched his jaw. "I need you to let go."

The silence that hung in the air was deafening, like no one dared to do so much as breathe to shatter the quiet. There were slow, thudding footsteps as Warden continued its approach. The golem had started making its way down the path, slowly lumbering towards the three, locked in a stalemate. It wasn't charging, not yet. It watched with dark red eyes, observing, gauging. Phil tilted his head just slightly, trying to hold onto Ranboo's gaze.

"Ranboo?" He said softly.

Ranboo's eyes cleared for a moment. He looked... almost sad. He opened his mouth, and with a shaky voice he spoke one word:

"*Help*."

The light left Ranboo's eyes.

As it did, Techno heard a crunch he recognized all too well; the sound of bone against bone.

There was a moment where time seemed to slow, as though the universe was watching on in disbelief. Ranboo held Phil's gaze with no life behind his eyes. Phil's face had dropped, his hope replaced by shock. His hand still rested against Ranboo's. Ilya's arm was still caught in

Ranboo's grip, a grip that had tightened like a vice until it had crushed the bones it held, and when it did, Ranboo became a stranger again.

It was quiet in that moment, but it was only a moment.

Then Ilya screamed.

The sound tore from his throat, grating against Techno's ears like knives. There wasn't much that could make Technoblade feel sick, but hearing Ilya in this moment made him taste bile. Phil was frozen where he stood, his face pale with disbelief. Ranboo let go of Ilya's arm and Ilya recoiled, backing up into Philza, his eyes shut tight as he continued to cry out.

Rose began to lurch forward, but Techno wrapped his hand around her arm at the last second, pulling her back before shouting to Phil, who pulled Ilya close to him and stumbled back. The path was clear between Ranboo and Warden, and the golem had wasted no time in its charge.

Before it's long, heavy arms collided with Ranboo's chest, Techno could have sworn he saw Ranboo smile.

Warden was not a creature Techno had ever underestimated. He'd seen the golem crush skeletons under its weight and send polarbears flying backward with one swing of its arm. Ranboo didn't stand a chance. Skinny as a twig and lighter than a gust of wind, one hit was all it took to slam him backwards, tumbling across the gravel path until he crashed into the fenced porch of the house at the end of the street.

Techno just stared. He couldn't move, his feet anchored in place, his gaze fixed on Ilya, on his arm, his skin already turning dark purple and red with blood, dented and bent at that point in the middle where Ranboo had held him. Where Ranboo had hurt him.

Ranboo had done that. He'd done it with hardly a twitch of his muscle. He'd done it while he was looking Phil in the eye. He'd done it like it was easy. Like it was nothing.

Rose ripped herself free from Techno's grasp, crossing the distance between her and her son in only a few steps. Ilya was sobbing, his breath catching between coughs and horrible, pained noises. Rose knelt, wrapping her arms around him, cradling his arm in her hand. She looked up at Phil, lost for words. Phil looked equally speechless, looking down at her his mouth open, trying to find the words.

Ranboo's howl began again, cutting in and out. Phil looked toward the splintering wood of what used to be a fence where Ranboo was collapsed, struggling to pull himself out of the mess. Phil looked at Techno, still standing frozen, then to Warden, still lumbering toward it's target, and then back to Techno.

His eyes were desperate. Searching. Begging Techno to move, to help, to do anything. He knew as well as Techno did, an iron golem's sole purpose was to protect its village, to handle any threat. When Warden got to Ranboo, it would kill him without hesitation. The pain of that realization was plastered on Phil's face as he stepped back from Ilya, letting Rose hold onto the boy.

In that moment, Technoblade knew Philza had made his choice.

In the entire time they'd known each other, Phil had only ever made one mistake. It was a mistake he made again and again and again, but it was always the same mistake. Always the same choice. He made it with no hesitation, with no thought towards his own self preservation, his own safety, his own life. Their life.

Philza chose to trust.

And Technoblade chose Philza.

In that moment, nothing else mattered. He shut his mind like a steel trap, blocking out the doubt and the confusion and the betrayal. He could worry about it all later. He could feel it all later. His body was moving on its own, closing the distance between him and Ranboo. He heard Philza's wings beat behind him, heard him place himself between Techno and Ranboo and the golem that slowly approached.

“Warden, stop! Please— someone, tell it to stop!” Phil rarely begged. Techno ground his teeth. He picked up pieces of splintered wood and threw them away from Ranboo’s trembling form. . He heard Philza stepping backwards away from Warden, toward them, still pleading for someone to call the golem off. No one did. In front of him, Ranboo was clutching at his head, raking his claws through his hair and covering his ears.

Whatever pang of sympathy Techno felt, he shoved it down. They needed to move. He reached out to grab Ranboo’s wrist, moving to pull him out of the crater he’d made in the porch, but even as his fingers had barely touched Ranboo’s skin, the boy howled louder, lashing out. Techno jerked to the side just before the claws reached his throat. Instead, they dragged across his cheekbone down to his jaw, splitting the skin with a sharp sting.

Ranboo squeezed his eyes shut tighter. Around him, Techno began to see light, dim at first but growing brighter, small specs of purple and white that danced in and out of view. His ears began to ring. The world around him felt like how air felt before lightning struck, heavy and crackling with noise and energy and anticipation.

The howl continued, now joined by a panicked chant, “ *wake up, wake up, wake up.*” Ranboo brought his hands to his face, fingers tensing, claws pressing into the skin at his temples. The cry that emanated from the boy began to falter, to crack. The lights flickered, pulsing.
“*Enough!*”

Techno should have grabbed his wrists or held him still. He should have pried his hands from his face. He should have pried his fingers off of Ilya’s arm. He should have stayed with him. He should have watched him. He should have left him at home. He should have asked him for the truth.

The cry cut off. Techno’s ears rang in its absence. The lights floated off, fizzling out like embers of a dying fire. Ranboo knelt with his hands in front of him, blinking the haze from his eyes. Purple blood trailed down his face from each of the new claw marks he’d etched over his eyes. It fell in small drops onto his palms. When he brought his gaze up to meet Techno’s eye, he looked like a deer staring down the bolt of a crossbow.

“Techno?” Ranboo’s voice was quiet and trembling, filled with a deep and growing fear. Almost as soon as he spoke, there was another voice calling out.

“Ilya, stop!” Rose shouted. Techno pulled himself to his feet. He drew his axe up from its place at his side, turning to face whatever calamity now faced them. He’d never fought an iron golem before. He wondered how many swings it would take to kill the beast.

He didn’t need to find out. In front of him was Phil, standing with his wings outstretched, in front of Phil was Ilya, clutching his arm to his chest, and in front of Ilya was Warden, now stopped in his tracks by nothing more than a child.

“Stop,” Ilya commanded. The golem looked down at him.

“Ilya!” Rose hissed, stepping toward them. Ilya ignored her.

“It’s alright, Warden.” Warden directed its gaze back up, looking past Phil and Techno to where Ranboo knelt. “I don’t want this,” Ilya said, shaking his head. Warden looked back down at him. “I’m alright.”

The golem stood stoic, staring down at the child who’d called it off of its hunt. Its arms hung at its sides, swaying slightly and creaking as they did. It looked back up, first at Phil, then at Techno, then finally at Ranboo. Then, with the sound of metal scraping against metal, it turned and began to lumber off back down the path. Phil’s wings sagged, draping against the ground as the tension left his shoulders.

“Ilya, what—” Rose began, but Ilya cut her off.

“It wasn’t his fault,” he said. The words caught Techno off guard. “It wasn’t him. Look, now he’s— he’s not—” Techno looked back at Ranboo, but the kid was still staring down at the ground, his eyes fixed at Techno’s feet as though looking up would physically pain him. Ilya continued. “It was something in that book, it— it made him different.”

Techno looked back to Ilya. The boy had turned to face his mother, to face the villagers who still stood around them. Techno hated the look they each held in their eyes. He hated the fear and suspicion. It was too familiar. His grip on the axe tightened where it hung down at his side. Maria caught his eye. Her expression was different. It was sad. Pitying. He hated it even more.

“He’s never done anything like that before,” Phil said. He sounded like he was in denial, trying to rationalize, to understand. “He’s never hurt anyone.” It didn’t matter. Techno knew it didn’t matter. He’d done it now.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Ilya repeated, his words shaky and cracked. “Just– I don’t want–” his voice was beginning to break. His scream echoed in Techno’s mind.

“Ilya, it’s alright,” Maria said, stepping forward toward him. Ilya had tear tracks streaming down his face. Rose looked to Maria, her expression lost and desperate. “Everyone just– just give us some space, okay?”

The villagers turned to each other. Techno saw Amaly turn to whisper something to Clayton, their faces solemn. He saw Lara gripping her husband’s arm with one hand, her eyes flicking from Ranboo to Ilya to Maria. He saw Emmett with tears welling up in his eyes, Amy holding him close to her, Lila peeking out from behind her father’s pant leg.

“We’ll sort this out. We don’t need everyone standing around staring right now,” Maria said. Her voice was clear, commanding. She only spoke like this when she was serious, when she needed something to get done. The song had left her tone, leaving only stoicism in its place. Lara was the first to move. She tugged her husband’s arm, stepping back and casting one last look of concern to Techno. The others followed soon after, turning hesitantly, some walking backwards as though they didn’t want to turn their backs to them. To Ranboo.

The crowd cleared, leaving only Ilya and Rose, Maria, and the three hybrids left. There was silence between them. Techno could hear Ranboo’s stuttered breathing behind him, but he couldn’t bring himself to turn and look at him. Maria turned her gaze to Phil.

“I warned you,” she said. Her voice was low, but it carried. Techno could see the way it hit Phil like a strike from a sword.

“Maria– Rose, if I had known–” Phil cast a glance back to Ranboo, his eyes darting up to Techno before he turned back. Rose’s face was somewhere between fury and betrayal and pity, and Techno didn’t know how she managed to express so much confusion with one look. She took a long, shaky breath before speaking.

“Phil, I’ve known you for a long time. Both of you. And— and I believe that you *thought* he was safe,” she said. “But he could have killed my son.” Techno felt cold. “You shouldn’t have brought him here.” Phil looked guilty. Horribly, crushingly guilty. Techno knew he’d blame himself— he’d put this all on his shoulders, anything for it to be his responsibility, anything for it to absolve Ranboo.

“I know,” Phil said quietly.

“Mom, it’s not his fault,” Ilya lamented. Before Rose could turn to respond to him, Maria interrupted her.

“Ilya,” she said, and both of their focuses snapped to her. “What did you see? What happened?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? He heard Ranboo’s breath catch, and when he turned his head just enough to look at him, his gaze was fixed on Ilya, listening intently. He didn’t remember. Techno didn’t need to ask him to know it was true. The confusion was plastered on his face. He turned back.

“I…” Ilya looked like he was deciding whether or not to lie. He had the same look all children did before they decide what adults wanted to hear. “He was here before. When you came to the village and you asked me about that howl?” He turned to Phil. “I told you it was the wind, but I— I lied. I snuck out to go see what the sound was, and I saw Ranboo, and he gave me that book…”

Ilya looked to the ground. The leatherbound book lay discarded on the path, knocked from Ranboo’s hand when the golem had struck him. Phil picked it up gingerly like it might burn him.

“He told me to hide it, so I did. He said not to tell anyone, not to let anyone see it, not to read it.” Ilya sniffed, wiping his eye with the back of his uninjured hand. He winced when the movement jostled his arm. “So when he came here, I asked if he wanted it back. And then he said he didn’t remember, so I told him, and I asked if he was— if he was gonna open it, and he

did, and—" Ilya swallowed hard, calming his breathing. "It was like he was a different person."

"Did he say anything?" Maria asked. They were talking about Ranboo like he wasn't right there, like he couldn't hear them. Though Techno supposed it didn't matter if he did.

"Right before he started making that noise, he said 'stop it.' That's it. And then it— it wasn't him. He was different, it wasn't him." Ilya was so sure. Certain. "He wouldn't answer, and he started digging his claws in, and then..." He trailed off. They all knew the rest.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo said.

They all turned to him. The claw marks that ran across his eyes were still bleeding sluggishly, dripping down his cheeks like tears. When all eyes were on him, he faltered.

"I..." His voice broke. He pinned his ears back, casting his gaze back down to the ground, shaking his head. "I didn't mean to, I don't— I don't remember." He squeezed his eyes shut, more purple blood welling up from the gashes at his eyebrows and cheekbones. "I didn't think—" he cut himself short, something stuck under the surface. Didn't think *what* ? Techno wanted to ask. He wanted to demand. "I'm sorry," Ranboo said. Rose was silent. Maria sighed.

"I think you should leave," she said. Ilya looked to her, but he said nothing. "All of you. Whether he meant to or not, it doesn't matter. He can't be here." Phil nodded silently. "He can't come back." Phil turned to look at Techno, then at Ranboo. He turned back, a question on his tongue, but hesitated before he asked.

"And... and us? Me and Techno?" Maria sighed.

"I don't know, Phil. That's not my choice to make." Phil nodded again, his face solemn. "You've been a good friend. You and Techno both. That'll count for something." Techno turned. He couldn't stand to see the guilt in Phil's eyes anymore. He faced Ranboo, and Ranboo looked up at him with that piercing gaze he always had. He searched for something in Techno's expression, some sign of comfort, sympathy, forgiveness.

Techno couldn't give it to him.

He knew it hurt him. He knew it stung from the way Ranboo's eyes shifted, began to shake, unable to hold his focus anymore. But right now, he couldn't be what Ranboo wanted. He couldn't trust blindly. He couldn't comfort him, couldn't tell him it was alright, that he'd be alright. That he forgave him.

"Can you stand?" Techno asked. His voice was emotionless and dry. Ranboo looked defeated, like all the fight had been taken out of him. He didn't answer, instead shifting his weight forward to push himself upright. When he stood, he swayed for a moment, but remained standing. He kept his eyes trained on the ground.

Behind them, he heard Maria speaking to Phil quietly.

"I know you'll try to help him, Phil," she said. "Just..."

"I know."

There was nothing left to say.

Ranboo had stopped his search for a reaction from Techno or Phil. He seemed closed in on himself, silently trailing behind the two of them as they made their way out of the village. Maria led them to the back gate, letting them avoid the stares that would come with leaving through the main entrance, and Ranboo gave no further glance toward her or Rose or Ilya. They waited there while she went back to the village center to gather the things they'd dropped there.

When they left, no one bid them goodbye. There was silence as they walked, Phil and Techno sharing hardly a glance before setting off back through the forest, Ranboo in tow behind them. Techno glanced back at him briefly, watching him dab at the cuts on his face with the sleeve of his shirt. It made him remember that he had been cut as well. That Ranboo had cut him. The lines on his cheek ached slightly with the cold.

It wasn't supposed to be his cheek, though, was it?

It was supposed to be his throat.

The deep lines that ran down the side of his face weren't meant to be there. They were meant to be worse. Intended to be worse. They were intended to be fatal, and if it had been anyone other than Techno, if it had been Maria or Rose or Ilya, he wondered if it would have been. If it had been Philza, he wondered if it would have been.

If it had been Philza, he wondered if the man would have even thought to dodge. In his eyes, Ranboo was incapable of this. He wasn't violent, he wasn't dangerous. He was just a little weird, a bit awkward. He wasn't a threat. He harbored no ill will.

But he was wrong, now. He'd been proven wrong. He'd told the village Ranboo wasn't dangerous— he'd told Ilya's mother Ranboo wasn't dangerous. When Phil trusted, he was blind. He didn't see what others saw. He didn't see Ranboo's claws, his sharpened teeth, his narrow pupils always watching, always piercing like a knife. He didn't see the suspicion the villagers had for this newcomer. He didn't see it when Ranboo lied, little lies, lies that added up, moments that added up.

Phil was blind, but Techno saw.

He saw, and he hated it. He saw every single thing that Ranboo had tried to hide, the lies he told when he spoke about his dreams or his memory or the things he'd forgotten. He saw the hesitation before he chose his words, the care with which he did so, only saying just enough, just what needed to be said.

It was intentional. It was practiced. It was an art of deception, one Techno had seen before, one he kept seeing no matter what he did to avoid it. It stained his history like ink, like blood. Every time he thought he was safe, every time he thought he could let his guard down for just a second, for a moment, to let himself rest, he was reminded that nothing was sacred. The other shoe always dropped.

There was no room for forgiveness in this world. When people showed you their true colors, you believed them. Anything less meant a knife in the back. Phil never learned. He never had to learn. But Techno did.

The Bastion had taught him first; family did not prevent a child from becoming a monster. Hatred was a promise, not a threat. The first time, he forgave. The second time, he learned. He painted the walls with their blood. When they went for the throat, he went for the heart. He survived.

The Butcher Army had taught him second; when things were too good to be true, it meant that they were. When people lied once, they'd lie a thousand times. When you forgave, they forgot, and when all that stood between their ego and their mistakes was a scapegoat, they would paint the walls with your blood. When they went for the throat, you put a pickaxe through their teeth. You survived.

Ranboo had gone for the throat.

Techno's grip tightened on his axe. He hadn't put it away, not since he'd drawn it at the village. It was heavy in his hand, a reminder of what he'd put on the line when it came down to it. Phil had made up his mind without a second thought. He knew what he was risking. He knew what it meant. He knew Techno would act first, think later. And here Techno was, proving him right.

It wasn't fair.

What a stupidly childish thought to have. Selfish, naive, innocent. Techno was not innocent. He knew this world owed him nothing. He was not naive. He had been forced to learn. But he was selfish. He'd always been selfish. Always clung to what little he had, like it would save him in the end. Why couldn't it have been easy? Why couldn't he have this, just once?

It would have been enough. He could have trusted. He could have lived with the lies, the small, meaningless lies. He could have lived in ignorance, never knowing, never doubting. He didn't need to learn again. He wished they'd never set foot outside their home.

Now they all had to learn that lesson again. Maria learned. Rose learned. Ilya...

Ilya had defended him. Ilya had stood, bloodied and broken, between Ranboo and the world. Ilya, who'd known Ranboo so briefly, who knew so little of him, who had the most reason to fear him, to detest him, to condemn him, had commanded them to stop. To listen.

It wasn't his fault, he'd said. *It wasn't him*. Techno had seen. He saw a creature he didn't recognize. Ilya had seen the same. And Ranboo had apologized. He said he didn't mean to. He said he didn't remember.

Techno wanted to believe him. He wanted nothing more right now than to believe him. *He's given us no reason not to trust him*, Phil had said. He'd insisted on it. He'd convinced them both. Ranboo was helpful, he was kind, he was genuine. He was a hard worker, a fast learner. He cooked food, mended clothes. He brought techno fools gold when he found it in the soil of the farms. He made Phil tea in the mornings. He offered all he knew. He spent hours translating books just because Techno asked. He gave Techno bandages when he returned from the Nether with an arrow in his shoulder. He noticed the fire before it spread. He woke Phil. He saved the portrait of Wilbur. He refused to take the dagger—

Techno stuttered to a stop, the crunch of ice quieting under his boots, the axe resting just at the surface of the snow that coated the path. His blood ran cold. *No*. Ranboo had refused to take the dagger. He'd watched Techno draw it from its sheath, watched the blade scatter light. He'd watched it with fear. He'd backed away. He...

"Techno?" Phil asked, but his voice sounded a mile away. Techno's shoulder's tensed. Why? Why had he refused to take the dagger? Why did his eyes look so distrustful? So guilty? *Why?*

Techno turned, slowly, delaying the inevitable. He didn't want to know. He didn't want the answer. He faced Ranboo, and there was so much fear in the boy's eyes it made him ache. It couldn't be true. *He's not dangerous*. It wasn't fair.

"Did you know?"

Techno's question hung in the air like a guillotine's blade.

Ranboo stared at him, unmoving, his eyes wide. He looked like a rabbit, frozen in place, waiting for the wolf to pass. Silent.

"Did you know you might hurt someone? That you might be dangerous?" His voice was even. It was steady. It was calm.

They were locked onto each other. Ranboo's lips parted, but he made no sound. Techno was longing for an answer that would make this go away, that would make it so they could go home, so they could think, so they could trust like before. Techno rarely begged, but he did now.

"Say no," he said. He was beginning to sound desperate. He didn't care. "Just say no." Ranboo said nothing. It wasn't fair. "Is that why you didn't take the dagger?" Ranboo's eyes began to shake, irises trembling from side to side, his pupils narrowing like a snake. *Just say no.*

"I'm sorry," Ranboo said.

Techno's grip on the axe tightened, his knuckles turning white. He ground his teeth so hard it hurt. It wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo said again. It felt like a knife in his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't—I didn't think I would—I didn't mean to—" he was searching again, searching for something in Techno's eyes that he wouldn't find. "I was just trying to find an answer, and Ilya—he had the book, and I didn't know—I thought it would—"

Ranboo looked past Techno to Phil. Techno didn't need to look to know what Phil's expression was. It would be sad. It would be painful. It would be betrayed. Ranboo began to look hopeless.

“Please,” he said. “Please, I didn’t—” He looked back to Techno, to the axe in his hand, to his grip that tightened around the handle. Ranboo stepped back. The look in his eyes had changed.

It was a familiar expression. Techno knew it well. He’d seen it a hundred times, on every hunt, before every kill. It was the look an animal got when it was about to run, when it realized it had been seen, when it realized that escape was an option.

He couldn’t let Ranboo escape, not now. Now that he’d begun to unravel the mystery in front of him, he couldn’t leave it half tangled. Ranboo was inching himself back, creating distance slowly as though Techno couldn’t see right through him. If Ranboo ran now, he’d take those answers with him. He’d take all of this with him. After everything, he’d tuck his tail and flee. Like it was nothing.

“Don’t run,” Techno said, his voice cold. Ranboo’s ears pinned back, his breath stuttering to a stop. He swallowed hard, avoiding Techno’s gaze.

“You don’t understand,” Ranboo said. “I can’t stay.”

“You’d just leave?” Techno asked. Ranboo flinched as though he’d yelled. That’s what he was doing, wasn’t it? He wanted to run. He wanted that escape. He couldn’t stand to look them in the eyes and tell them he knew, tell them what he’d hidden. “It’s easier that way, isn’t it?” Ranboo’s eyes widened, and he shook his head hard.

“No, *no*, that— that’s not—”

“Then *what?* ” Techno demanded.

“I can’t,” he muttered miserably, keeping his eyes trained on the ground. “I... I shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t have *stayed*. I thought I wouldn’t...” He dug his fingers into his palms. “I thought I wouldn’t hurt anyone. I’d never...”

“You did,” Techno said.

“ *Techno*, ” Phil hissed. Techno didn’t turn to look at him. Phil had kept silent, let Techno question, interrogate, but he had a limit to how much pain he’d let something he loved endure. And Techno was the source of that pain.

It wasn’t fair. He was always the monster, always the one who had to be selfish, who had to protect, who had to know the ground would be there before he took the next step. Phil didn’t care if the world fell away beneath him, and so Techno was always there to make sure the bridges wouldn’t crumble.

“Ranboo, mate, just... just explain what happened,” Phil asked. “You’ve never done anything like that before.” Ranboo just shook his head harder. “Ilya said you were like a different person...” Phil prompted.

“It– it doesn’t matter,” Ranboo said.

“Why?” Techno demanded. Ranboo flinched again. Something inside him felt bad for being so cold, so unfeeling, but he needed to know. He couldn’t move until he knew, for certain.

“Cus it was still me. It was my body, it was my hands. I– I broke his arm, and... I cut you.” Ranboo looked up at Techno, at his cheek that still ached.

“But if you weren’t in control–” Phil started, but he was cut off.

“It doesn’t matter!” Ranboo shouted.

His voice carried in the trees. Techno and Phil were both stunned into silence. They’d never heard him raise his voice before, but now he seemed like he was unraveling.

“You wouldn’t say that if– what if I killed him? What if I killed you? What then? You wouldn’t forgive me. The reason wouldn’t matter, it would be my fault– it *is* my fault! You *know* it’s my fault.”

When all that stood between their ego and their mistakes was a scapegoat, they would paint the walls with your blood.

Ranboo hadn’t, though. He’d thrown away his scapegoat. He was painting with his own blood, now.

Ranboo flinched hard, then, his hands flying to his head where he dug his nails into his scalp.

“ *Stop* ,” he wailed. He held to his hair in fistfuls, breathing hard. “Just *stop*, I can’t do this anymore.”

When things were too good to be true, it meant that they were.

There was more going on here. Under the surface, under the facade that was now slowly cracking, falling away, there was something more sinister.

Children didn’t run miles through ice and snow until their feet bled over any old thing.

Either he’d done something, or something had been done to him.

“You ruined it,” Ranboo said, his voice hardly audible. He wasn’t talking to Phil or Techno anymore, and Techno wasn’t even sure if he was talking to himself. He kept his hands covering his face, his whole body tense like if he relaxed for even a second, he’d shatter. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I shouldn’t have come, I should have just stayed away right from the start, I–” He stopped, becoming silent again. His breath shuddered from his lungs. “You should have let me die.”

The words were haunting. They were an echo. They were a ghost that came back again and again and again, words that had been spoken by his own brothers, *we should have let you die*, before their throats gurgled with blood and their bodies fell upon each other. They were words that had become some distorted reflection of themselves, hissed out in the final moments of someone who used to be a friend, *you should have killed me when you had the chance*, before the light left his eyes.

He imagined Ranboo meeting the same fate.

He imagined him limp in the snow where they found him. He imagined him silent, motionless, buried by the storm, only found when the thaw came and the world had moved on. No one to look for him. No one to miss him. No one to mourn. No one to call out to, to blame, to bring him inside and warm him up by the fire and keep him safe. Maybe he and Phil would have found him when it was all said and done. Maybe they would have buried him. Maybe they would have wondered who he was, if he was anyone at all, if he had cried for help.

“I can’t stay,” Ranboo said.

“Ranboo—” Phil sounded broken. Techno hated it.

“It won’t stop,” Ranboo said, his voice quivering. He took another step back. He stumbled on the snow, catching himself, trying so hard not to crumble. “I can’t make it stop. I tried, I— I promise, I did. But you’ve seen it. You’ve seen what it does.”

“Seen *what*?” Phil asked. Ranboo flinched again, some unseen force threatening to bring him to his knees. This was wrong. This was *wrong*. He felt the same as he did when he saw a wolf prowling by the barns, when he heard a creeper had made its way into the village, when he watched a skeleton aim its bow at Phil. The threat was no longer Ranboo.

“It’ll only make it worse,” Ranboo said. “Knowing only makes it worse.”

Family did not prevent a child from becoming a monster.

Ranboo was not a monster. He was not a traitor, or a liar, or a coward. He was a child. He was still a child. He was not a monster, not yet.

Techno looked into Ranboo's eyes, red and green and piercing, now lined above and below with long purple cuts that might one day become scars, that might one day remind them of this. One day when they were safe, when they were home, when they were together. When they were family.

"There's something else, isn't there? Something's making you like this?" Techno asked. The pieces were falling into place, now. Ranboo was listening to something, speaking to something. He was fighting something. "You asked for help." Ranboo shook his head. "We can't unless we know what's going on."

"No, I— I don't want it anymore. I don't want help. I take it back."

"Ranboo—" Techno began to step forward, but Ranboo held his hand out, lurching back so suddenly that Techno was now the one frozen, worried any move would set him running.

Ranboo was right. Knowing only made it worse.

"You can't run from this," Techno said, his voice soft. Ranboo held his gaze, his eyes sharp, wide, unwavering as his expression slowly shattered. The tracks of blood that ran down his cheeks looked like tears. "It'll follow you." Whatever he was running from before, whatever had driven his fear, biting at his heels until he made himself bleed, it was still with him now. It had stayed with him. He'd never escaped.

"I'll go far," Ranboo said, taking a step back. "I'll go where no one will find me. Where it can't find *you*."

Ranboo had stopped trying to convince Techno of this plan; now, he was trying to convince himself. He was trying to spare them. He was sacrificing himself.

Techno began to feel fear, then. Real fear, fear like what Phil had felt in the village when the iron golem was bearing down on Ranboo with nothing but purpose in its eyes, fear like what had shone in Ranboo's eyes, too, when he realized what was about to happen, when he asked for help.

He was going to lose this again. He couldn't. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't survive it this time. He was selfish, and he was afraid, and he was going to lose it all again.

"Don't run," Techno said. He wanted to reach out and grab him before he had the chance to turn and flee, but he stood frozen.

"You'll be safe," Ranboo said. "You'll be happy. Like before."

Ranboo was waiting for someone else to make up his mind for him. His words were a challenge that hung heavy in the air between them; *tell me I'm right*. It faded into the quiet all the same. The forest made everything quiet here. The snow swallowed up noise and words and sound and made things silent in a way the Nether never was, made things a home in a way the Nether never could. Technoblade had spent too long giving chase, always the hunter, always the drive behind some other creature's fear. He couldn't be that this time. He wasn't used to standing still, but this time, he had to. This time, there was no hunt.

He could be what Ranboo was searching for. He had to be. Otherwise, it would all be over. Techno held out his hand, his arm rising slowly, palm up. An invitation.

"Don't run," he said again.

"*Stop*," Ranboo whined. "Please, stop." Techno shook his head.

"I already lost my family once, Ranboo." An offer. "I can't do it again." A promise. "Stay."

Emotions flashed across Ranboo's face; fear, recognition, defeat. His trembling eyes slowed to an even, steady gaze. He stared at Techno's outstretched palm, blinking away blood, or tears, or both.

There was a moment where Techno thought he'd do it, that he'd really run. He wondered, if he did, would he follow? Would he bring him back, kicking and screaming? Would he let himself fail, let this one get away?

Then Ranboo's cold, boney fingers were resting gently in his palm, the towering, terrifying creature standing before him now nothing more than a frightened child crying for help. Techno's axe dropped to the ground with a thud and he reached up, placing his hand on the back of Ranboo's neck and bringing his head down to cradle in the hollow between his chest and his shoulder. He wrapped his other arm around Ranboo's back, holding him close, and when he did, the boy's knees buckled, bringing them both down to kneel in the snow.

Ranboo cried.

He cried like a child. The built up tension and fear and pain left him all at once in hiccups and sobs and choked out apologies. He brought his hands up, curling into fists against Techno's chest and he cried until he had nothing left. He trembled like a leaf in a snowstorm, clinging to what little it had to hold onto until the wind stopped and the clouds passed, and when he was empty, he still clung as though he knew the storm would come again.

Techno held him. He could do nothing more. Any words he said would fall on deaf ears, spoken only for his own sake, so he stayed silent, and he waited. When Ranboo fell silent, nothing more to expel, he remained kneeling, tucked against Techno. He still shook. Small, soft noises left his throat in between breaths, little sounds that felt like cracking a joint.

Techno looked up at Phil, who had remained standing like a sentinel in front of them, his wings half spread, expression unreadable. He blinked down at Techno, neither of them daring to be the one that broke the silence, to be the one that brought reality crashing back down onto Ranboo's head.

They couldn't stay here forever.

The journey home was long, and they had to return before the sun set. The world was dangerous in the dark. Here, in the snow, it was cold. The chill that came with standing still for too long was beginning to set in, snow melting into the fabric of Techno's pants, seeping into the cracks of his armor. He could only imagine it was the same for Ranboo. It would be worse. He'd be burned.

"Ranboo," Techno said, keeping his voice as quiet as he could. He wasn't used to being gentle. Ranboo warbled at him lowly. "Hey," he said softly. Techno wasn't a comforting person. He wasn't sure what to do. He ran his hand up and down Ranboo's back. "We gotta get up," he said.

Slowly, Ranboo pushed himself back from Techno's chest. His hands still trembled. He kept his head ducked, his hair covering his face. He took a shaky breath, a light trill escaping as he did.

"We gotta get home before it's dark," Techno said. Ranboo nodded. He shifted his weight, beginning to get his feet underneath him. "Do you need help?" Techno asked. Ranboo paused for a moment before nodding again. "Okay." Techno held out his hand to Ranboo, and Ranboo took it once again. His fingers were ice cold. Techno doubted he could feel them at all. They stood together, Techno placing his other hand under Ranboo's elbow to hold his weight, drawing him upright.

He stood with his shoulders hunched, head ducked down, but under the curtain of his hair Techno and Phil both saw the mess his face had now become. Joining the long, jagged claw marks over were streaks of burned skin, raw and swollen where his tears had gathered and trailed down his cheeks. He squinted, unable to fully open his eyes, his brows knit close together and jaw clenched tight. He looked miserable. He looked exhausted.

"Oh, mate," Phil murmured sadly.

He pulled his pack over one shoulder, digging around for a moment before he brought out the familiar jar of glistening orange salve. He ran one thumb over the surface, bringing his hand up to Ranboo's face. As he did, Ranboo warbled again, but he didn't flinch back. He closed his eyes, letting Phil spread the cream over his cheeks and at the corners of his eyes. Ranboo blinked a few times as he finished. His pupils were blown wide.

“Let’s go home, yeah?” Phil asked. Ranboo nodded silently.

They walked next to each other this time, not in a line. Ranboo stumbled slightly as he walked but remained on his feet. Even so, Techno remained at the ready to catch him just in case. Ranboo walked with his hands held close to his chest, folded over one another.

After a few minutes of walking, he finally broke his silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Techno knew he would say it again. He’d say it a thousand more times, once for every time he remembered and once more for every time he was forgiven.

“We know,” Techno said gently.

“I… I should have told you,” Ranboo said, his voice filled with regret.

“You can tell us now,” Phil offered. Ranboo trilled, his ears twitching.

“I don’t know where to start,” he said. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” He blinked and winced at the motion.

“Start wherever you want,” Phil said. “We’ve got time.” The statement made Ranboo relax some, his shoulders dropping from their spot at his ears, and he let out a breath.

“Um… I don’t know. There’s—” Ranboo hesitated. There was still such fear in his eyes, mixed in with guilt that seemed burned into his expression. He let out a sigh. The time had come and gone for secrets. “There’s this voice.”

Techno felt something shift in the world, the wind slightly different, the sky slightly darker, the woods slightly quieter. This was the start of a new undoing.

Ranboo started from the beginning.

“It calls itself Dream.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp. I got emotional writing that chapter, so uh.... I hope you got emotional reading it >:)

In all seriousness, thank you all for reading. This is getting a lot more interaction than I ever expected, and I appreciate every single read and kudos and comment!!

As always, I'll update this end note with progress on the next chapter as I work on it. drink some school, stay in drugs, don't do water :)

6/20 - writing those last three chapters took like. all of my brain energy. so after a few days, I'm finally getting started on the next chap :D

6/25 - still workin!! I've got about half of it done right now, and I'm working a bunch more on it today :0

Scopaesthesia

Chapter Summary

It was like opening a dam. Things came out slowly at first, a trickle of information, until Ranboo was rambling on and on and on about every single thing he could remember, all the fear and uncertainty he'd felt from Dream, all of the visions, the words that had been spoken to him and the times he remembered interacting with the horrific creature that called itself Dream.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was supposed to be short... oops.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“It wasn’t much,” Ranboo said. He passed the book into Phil’s waiting hand, his fingers lingering on the cover for an extra moment before releasing it. “I don’t think the dream had to do with anything. Just something about rotten carrots.” Phil flipped open the book, turning to the most recent page. “But, um. The thing about *pulling*. In the margins. Was that written down the last time you looked at it?”

Phil skimmed over the page, holding his thumb over the margin where the new line had appeared; *I think it was pulling me away*. Ranboo waited as Phil read it, watching the man’s face change in focus. Eventually, he shook his head.

“Did you write it last night?” Phil asked, looking up briefly before turning to the previous page, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary there.

“I must have,” Ranboo said. There was a second half to that thought that stayed silent; *I don’t remember*. But Phil didn’t probe further. He simply nodded, skimming over the pages for another moment. Seeing the book in someone else’s hand still felt strange. Every time he passed it over or let Phil or Techno look over his shoulder, he felt like he should be snatching it away, snapping it shut, or tucking it away in his cloak out of sight. He had to remind himself each time that releasing it wasn’t a bad thing.

This had become the new normal. Techno and Phil would check his memory book before bed, scanning the pages for anything they'd missed during the day, and in the morning Ranboo would wake and write down anything and everything he remembered from the night before, from his sleep, from his dreams. During the day, Ranboo wrote down as much as he could as soon as he could, and while Ranboo himself had already gotten into the habit of checking the book frequently, now that diligence was extended by Phil and Techno as well.

When they'd returned from the east village three days ago, it felt wrong. Even after everything he'd told Phil and Techno, after he'd confessed, after he'd laid out everything he knew and remembered on the table, handing over the book was different. It was an extension of his mind, reliable when his memory wasn't. Passing it into someone else's hands felt like handing off his thoughts for someone else to manage.

The idea of it then was half terrifying and half relieving.

It had taken some reassurance from Phil before Ranboo was able to release the book, loosening his grip on the cover where his claws had dug into the leather. When he did, he felt cold— and even colder when he had to watch them read through his thoughts, picking apart what little he had left of his memory and his privacy. It was necessary, he knew. But that didn't make it feel any less like treachery. Whether that feeling of betrayal was towards Techno and Phil or towards Dream, he didn't know.

But when Phil and Techno had read over that corner of his mind, they weren't angry. Or, at the very least, they were good at hiding it. Ranboo was grateful for that. He didn't know how much more he could see of those cold expressions he'd seen from them after the village, of Phil's disappointed confusion, of Techno's stony betrayal. He could only take their word for it now that he was forgiven, that they understood. And Ranboo didn't have a hardcover copy of their minds to fact check their honesty in; he only had to trust.

Now though, passing the book off flooded him with relief. It was a weight off of his conscience somehow, a knowledge that he wasn't the only one keeping track of his mind anymore. The three of them were on the same page, and Ranboo didn't have to work so hard to explain the limited function of his memory. When they read the book and lined it up with his recollection, it had finally begun to make sense to them.

Phil handed back Ranboo's memory book, his expression holding no hostility. He wore the same soft smile he always did. It made the book feel a little less heavy when Ranboo accepted it back into his possession.

"Do you know what it might be referring to?" Phil asked, turning back to the kitchen to lift the kettle from the stove and continue making himself a cup of tea. He pulled a second mug from the cabinet and poured Ranboo a cup as well. Ranboo opened the book, reading over the new line again.

There was a difference in his language when he spoke about Dream, usually in the present tense, or more cryptic, and less centered around himself. This was from his own thoughts, his clear headed and coherent thoughts. Not only that, the handwriting was much neater than when he wrote about Dream, and certainly from when Dream wrote *for* him. Ranboo looked up to find Phil watching him.

"I um. I don't think the *"it"* is actually *Dream* here," Ranboo said. He was still getting used to thinking out loud. Usually, he would process this silently, more often than not while staring off into the fire or out the window. He had to remind himself that Phil knew everything there was to know, and that Phil needed to know what Ranboo was thinking so he could help. "I was referencing something that happened already, which makes me think it... it's probably about the last time I saw Dream. In the village."

Phil paused before passing Ranboo his cup of tea. The change in his expression was brief, quickly masked, but Ranboo saw it nonetheless. He still couldn't quite place it. Techno and Phil both shared a similar look when Ranboo spoke about his encounters with Dream, but the village in particular elicited a uniquely sour reaction from the two of them. Ranboo didn't think it was about *him* necessarily. In fact, he was certain he got a similar look on his face when thinking about it as well. Try as he might, he still couldn't quite scrape the memory of blood from under his claws, and the slowly healing cuts over his face were a grim reminder of the entire ordeal.

"While you were, uh. Enderwalking, yeah?" Phil asked. The word was awkward on his tongue. Ranboo nodded.

It was a name Techno had given Ranboo's bouts of semi-conscious conversations with Dream. "*You're not sleeping,*" he'd said. "*So it's not sleepwalking. And you're an Enderman, so... look, I needed to call it something. I couldn't keep writing down 'weird demon*

hallucinations' in my notes. ” The name had clicked with him and Ranboo fairly quickly, but Phil still seemed to be having trouble truly addressing around some of the things Ranboo described with real, tangible language. The Enderwalk was one of them. Though, in his defense, Ranboo still couldn't wrap his head around it either. It was one of those things he'd just gotten used to, but still didn't understand.

“I remember the feeling of being pulled,” Ranboo said.

He placed the memory book down on the kitchen table next to the various piles of papers, maps, and books Techno and Phil had been pouring over the past few days. The first memory book was still with Techno, where it stayed at night to further ensure Ranboo couldn't sneak a look into it again. He didn't want to look at that book, of course, but what he *wanted* didn't really matter when something else was holding the reins.

“It was—” Ranboo cut himself off. The sensation still lingered with him, even now. It never quite went away, that feeling of something being ripped from him, being pulled out from between his ribs when Dream had placed its hand over his chest. It had felt like his heart was moving forward, leaving his body behind. Ranboo slowly took a sip of his tea, trying to shake the chill he felt. “I thought it was Dream doing something. In the Enderwalk, he touched me, and I thought that's what I felt. But now I'm not sure.”

Phil hummed. Ranboo took a sip of his tea. Phil always made it perfect, never bitter. Small green leaves rested at the bottom of the cup.

“So if *it* doesn't refer to Dream, what would it be?” Phil asked.

“A place, maybe? The Void, or the End. But it felt like— I don't know. Like something inside of me.” Phil watched him expectantly, knowing there was more to the thought. Ranboo scratched his temple, careful to avoid the cuts over his eyebrows. “One of the books I translated with Techno mentioned something about a pearl – *the life force of the Enderman.* ”

“That's what lets them teleport, right?” Phil asked. Ranboo nodded.

“I think— maybe that’s what the pull was,” he said. The leaves swirled gently in the bottom of the cup in his hands. He didn’t look up to see Phil’s expression.

“Things keep coming back to the pearl, huh,” Phil said thoughtfully. He walked to the table, flipping through some notes.

Phil was right. All paths continued to lead them back to the idea of the pearl, though the pearl itself was an elusive concept. It was difficult to tell exactly what it was. After pouring over the two books and the translations Ranboo had written up prior, there were a few interpretations, but they seemed to be far more in the line of guesswork than anything scientific. Endermen were, evidently, difficult to study.

One book had noted it as the key to Endermen’s teleportation, claiming that the pearl allowed them to pass into the Void at one location and exit at another. If Dream was trying to find a way out of the Void, the pearl seemed to be the thing that would do it. But Ranboo didn’t know if he had a pearl, and there weren’t really any ways to test one way or another since that would involve either teleporting (a skill Ranboo had yet to even understand in theory, nonetheless in practice) or dying (a skill Ranboo had managed to successfully avoid thus far, which he didn’t intend to change).

It was unclear if the pearl was something physical or metaphorical - in some sense, it’s descriptions read similarly to how one might read about a human spirit, something intangible, something that was believed in rather than seen. Though the texts also noted that when an Enderman died, it left a pearl behind, and that seemed to be a true, literal pearl. Techno had noted that it could be like a bone, like how animals leave behind a skeleton when they decompose. Phil wondered if it was like the ash that Creepers left when they exploded, a remnant of the mob only exposed upon its death.

This was also when Ranboo learned what a Creeper was. He was more relieved than ever to live in the tundra where they didn’t venture. The idea of them was horrifying.

But this was, unfortunately, indicative of how almost all of their research had gone so far. They would read, take notes, compare texts, try to find answers, but in the end, their resources were limited and their knowledge was even moreso. Everything was a guess or a theory or an idea, something that sounded right, but couldn’t be confirmed, couldn’t be tested.

After three days of pouring over the information in front of them, Techno had announced that they were, unfortunately, at a dead end. It was time to switch tactics. Try as they might, they would find nothing more reading over the same five books they'd already practically memorized, and Ranboo's memory of past events grew cloudier with each day that passed. This observation was pointed out much to Ranboo's dismay, but he knew it was true. Memories never got clearer.

Instead, Techno proposed a new approach: the first memory book provided them with information they didn't have before, the most vital of which was the notes Ranboo had taken on his journey.

Techno took note every time Ranboo had written down a landmark, no matter how brief or how vague. From the book, it was clear Ranboo had travelled through the Nether. There were notes of fortresses, crimson red forests, lakes of lava. He'd noted run ins with mobs, skeletons and ghasts and hoards of zombified Piglins. It was Techno's intention to track Ranboo back the way he came, back to wherever he came from in search of his past.

Ranboo was not eager to do so. One of the few memories he retained from his time before being found by Techno and Phil was the feeling of running from something, a feeling of terror. The feeling remained even now, even after all this time. He didn't know what he'd be returning to, just that he didn't want to return – that he shouldn't return.

Coward.

Ranboo flinched, jerked from his thoughts. A splash of tea fell from his cup and landed softly on the floor. He looked up to find Phil watching him carefully, concern now creeping into his expression.

“Dream?” Phil asked. Ranboo pulled his ears back, but nodded. “What did it say?”

“Coward,” Ranboo said softly. It seemed to be Dream's favorite word lately, some strange attempt to make him feel guilt or egg him on, Ranboo didn't know which.

“What were you thinking about?” Phil asked. Ranboo had to remind himself to be honest.

“The trip,” Ranboo admitted. “Going back to... wherever. It still just—” he paused, trying to find the words. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“You’ve got me an’ Techno this time,” Phil said reassuringly. “We’ll keep you safe.” Ranboo smiled slightly. He knew Phil was right, and he was grateful for the safety he felt around the two of them. And he trusted them. It wasn’t like there was really another way.

“I know,” he said quietly. Outside, he could hear footsteps as Techno approached Phil’s front door. He didn’t open it right away though, instead knocking, which was a rare occurrence. Phil raised an eyebrow and stepped forward to open the door, revealing Techno with his arms full of even more books and papers.

“Morning,” he huffed, shouldering the door open the rest of the way. He dumped the materials onto the table, pushing other texts out of the way as he did. A lot of it looked like new notes, at least from what Ranboo remembered. There were pages upon pages of notes scribbled next to drawings as well as a few crudely drawn maps that looked a bit more like a story drawn in pictures. Ranboo wondered if Techno had stayed up all night working on this. Phil, apparently, wondered the same thing.

“Did you sleep?” Phil asked. Techno just rolled his eyes. “Do you want tea?” He asked instead.

“Will it wake me up?” Techno responded.

“I can make some that will, if you want,” Phil offered, and Techno nodded.

“You want honey in it?” Techno nodded again, a slight smile creeping onto his face which he quickly wiped away. He began organizing the papers on the table, stacking up the books on the chair next to him to keep them out of the way. On the top of the stack was the first memory book, which Ranboo pointedly ignored.

“Any dreams?” Techno asked. Ranboo shook his head, but realized that Techno wasn’t even looking up at him to see the answer.

“No,” he said. “But I wrote something down sometime between last night and this morning.” Techno reached over to pick up the memory book from the table and flipped it open, reading over the new line for a brief moment before grunting and putting it back down.

There was a stark difference in the approaches that Phil and Techno took to their newfound knowledge of Ranboo’s situation. Phil was far more concerned, more sympathetic. He tended to Ranboo first, then addressed the more practical matters. Techno, on the other hand, was concerned with Dream more often than not. Ranboo knew the man was paranoid. There was hardly a moment where Techno was unaware of his surroundings, constantly scanning, constantly situating himself with as much knowledge as he could. And yet despite that, despite all the work he’d done to know as much as he could, Ranboo had come along toting Dream with him to ruin that certainty he’d built.

Ranboo knew that the knowledge of Dream came with a never ending paranoia. He’d lived with it for weeks now. But while he’d never wish that on anyone else, he selfishly felt less alone now that he wasn’t the only one aware of Dream’s presence. When they’d walked home from the village after the disaster that had taken place there, Ranboo was finally, *finally* able to tell Techno and Phil about Dream.

It was like opening a dam. Things came out slowly at first, a trickle of information, until Ranboo was rambling on and on and on about every single thing he could remember, all the fear and uncertainty he’d felt from Dream, all of the visions, the words that had been spoken to him and the times he remembered interacting with the horrific creature that called itself Dream.

He told them how he remembered running, how when he dreamt, he dreamt of searching. He told them of the first time he remembered truly Enderwalking, when he spoke to Dream in their home right before he put his hand into the bucket of water. Dream had told him something about the Void, something about the darkness there, but anything more was lost to his memory now.

He confessed, too, his suspicion that he’d started the fire. He still didn’t know. Dream lied, he knew it, but it was too much of a coincidence for him to have been innocent. Even if it wasn’t him, Dream had tried to force him to let it spread. It had told him to go back to sleep.

Phil always managed to see the good in Ranboo, though. Despite everything he told them, he pointed out the moments where Ranboo was in control, where he fought back. He woke up Phil during the fire, asked for help in the village. Even now, he had been trying to run from them to keep them safe. He wanted to spare them. He desperately wanted to spare them. Even when Ranboo still continued his attempts to convince them it would be safer if they left, Techno cut him short, assuring him that they could defend themselves.

It wasn't much, but it was enough. Ranboo didn't want to hurt anyone, but if it came down to it, at least Phil and Techno would be able to subdue him or defend themselves. He didn't want to think about what would have happened if he'd stayed with Ilya when he first came across him. He still couldn't shake the feeling of crunching bones in his grip. It made him sick.

The Enderwalk from the village stood out to Ranboo, though. It was different. He remembered more, and it wasn't fading like others did. He remembered the way his surroundings looked abandoned, how he hadn't fully forgotten where he was. He remembered Phil and Techno. Dream had presented himself as human, and the thought still confused him. It had presented itself as a man, a human, one who looked like he would have blended into a village perfectly fine. Someone who could have existed. Who could have lived.

Ranboo had tried to convince himself that he was in control. He'd been wrong.

Phil and Techno had let him speak. They'd listened. And when they got home, they began to make a plan.

"I got the general landmarks down," Techno said. Phil walked over to look at the papers he'd laid out, and Ranboo leaned in for a better look. "You didn't really note directions like east or west, but in the middle part of the memory book it's actually pretty detailed navigation." Techno turned to Ranboo, his expressions somewhat impressed, but Ranboo didn't know what to say, so he shrugged. "If I'm right, the fortress you mention here is the same as the one over here," Techno continued, pointing to two different maps featuring sketchy drawings of landmarks; a structure that Ranboo assumed represented the fortress, a lake of lava to one side, hills surrounding it, and a forest to the other. "If it is, that cuts out almost half of the trip."

“Lucky,” Phil said, leaning over the maps. Techno grunted.

“You’ve had a better birdseye view of the Nether than I have, at least for a while. If you put together the maps, Ranboo and I could spend the day packing?” Techno suggested, and Phil nodded, shuffling around some of the papers.

“Sounds good to me,” he said.

“If you need to know what any of the drawings mean, just ask. I’m not a great artist,” Techno sighed. From the look of the maps, though, Ranboo would be to differ. Techno had detailed in clusters of trees, bastions and fortresses, hills, cliffs, and even drawn a few ghosts on the maps. Considering he’d done it all in one night, it was an impressive visualisation of Ranboo’s trip in and out of the Nether. Phil didn’t comment, though, only taking another sip of his tea before sitting down to go over Techno’s work.

Ranboo looked over to Techno, who jerked his head toward the basement door. Ranboo slid on his boots and followed Techno down the stairs, closing the door behind him after Techno lit the lamp at the top of the stairs.

“We’ll pack today and leave tomorrow, bright and early,” Techno said shortly. “Not much point in putting it off, right?” His tone was bizarrely lighthearted, but Techno tended to try his best to keep himself, as well as Ranboo and Phil, out of the doldrums of pessimism. Ranboo appreciated it. It was a breath of fresh air, especially considering how often Ranboo found himself dwelling in his own thoughts for too long.

“I can wake up Phil this time, if you want,” Ranboo offered, and Techno snorted.

“I think he’d rather you make breakfast again like last time. Certainly brought his mood up,” Techno said. “And I can handle a pillow to the head.” Ranboo smiled and nodded. He wondered if Techno secretly enjoyed waking Phil up, just another chance for him to poke fun at the man. “We won’t need to leave as early, anyway. There’s no day or night in the Nether.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. “Right.” They reached the bottom of the stairs. Small windows let in pale morning sun from outside, casting narrow rectangles of light on the stone basement floor.

Techno laid out large backpacks, throwing down three bedrolls into a pile next to them. They got to work packing.

Since Ranboo had no way of tracking the exact amount of time he'd traveled while he was writing in the Nether, they didn't know how long the trip would be. Techno and Phil had decided it was better to be safe than sorry, which meant they would be packing to be self-sustaining rather than prepared in advance. They were bringing supplies to hunt and prepare food along the way, ground taps to draw up water from the forest roots, and various other tools and materials they might need for any number of bumps along the way. Techno had a few brewing stands set up in the basement as well, this time situated on the cobblestone and far from anything wooden.

There were small things that Techno and Phil had started doing differently, minor changes to the routine in an attempt to limit risk. Ranboo was never left alone near an open fire, nor was he allowed to cook using the stove or sharp knives. Phil stood next to his tea while the water boiled now. And Ranboo didn't know if Techno had slept more than a few hours since they'd gotten back to the homestead. And at night, they'd come to the unfortunate decision to place bells on the door and windows of Ranboo's room. He tried to ignore how much of a prisoner that made him feel like, choosing instead to feel relief that Dream's scheming may have been cut off before it began. He'd slept without dreams the past few nights, and aside from a few words heard here and there, and while the silence was uncanny, it certainly wasn't unwelcome.

Techno packed in strangely neat disorder. He made no list, but seemed to store everything they needed solely in his head, calling upon it with ease when he needed to. It made Ranboo remember that he and Phil considered themselves adventurers before, that this was likely something they were more used to than staying in one place for so long. Techno seemed to pack up to leave as though it was second nature, like reading a book. They dug through chests and laid out everything they needed, separating the supplies into piles. They broke for lunch, but shortly returned back to the bustle of organizing and packing.

Eventually, his steady train of new things to search for in the basement halted, and Ranboo looked up to find Techno standing over an open chest, a few bars of gold in his hand. Ranboo's tail flicked at his ankle.

"What's that for?" He asked. Techno let out a breath.

“We need to get you armor,” he said, placing the bars next to his pack and bringing out some more. “The Nether isn’t like the Overworld. It’s dangerous. A leather chestplate isn’t enough.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. He’s shut that door before it even opened, it seemed. There was no way Lara was still making him a set, and even if she was, there was even less a chance that any of them would dare set food back into the village so soon. Eventually, Ranboo hoped, Phil and Techno at the very least could return.

“There’s a bastion not far from the portal. A Piglin stronghold. They’ll have somethin’ that’ll work,” Techno said. He rummaged in the chest for another moment, pulling out a gold cuff, which he tossed to Ranboo. Ranboo caught it awkwardly, nearly dropping it. It was a simple piece, more of jewelry than armor, with light engravings at the top and bottom. “You should be able to bend that to fit your wrist. Gold is soft.”

Ranboo slid the cuff over his wrist, pinching the ends together in his palm until it fit with only a little room on either side. He could put his sleeve underneath it and it would work fairly well. He looked up at Techno, who nodded at him. Ranboo slid it back off of his wrist and turned it over in his hands, watching the light glint off the edge.

“Piglins like gold,” he said. “It’s a sign of kinship. But more importantly, it’s a sign of intelligence.” Ranboo raised his eyebrows. “Gold is one of the only ores in the Nether. If you can mine it, and craft with it, you’ve proven yourself smarter than most of the mobs that live there. And if you’re smart, you can trade.”

“So they won’t attack if we wear gold?” Ranboo asked.

“Depends on the mood. And how close you get. But that’s the safest bet, yeah,” Techno said. He opened another chest, digging through for a moment before moving onto the next, where he seemed to find what he was looking for. He paused, and then pulled out a long wooden shield that was reinforced with iron. “It’s a bit clunky,” Techno said, holding it out to Ranboo with the backside facing toward him. “But I know you won’t take a weapon, and I need you to have a way to defend yourself.”

Ranboo put his arm through the straps on the back. Techno tightened the one around his forearm, fitting it snugly. He felt like he was preparing to go into battle. He wasn’t sure what

to expect, but even so, he felt unprepared. The shield was heavy. The reinforcement around the edge was dented, but only slightly. It hadn't seen much use. On the front, there were six studs, three going down either side, pointed at the tips. Of the many second hand pieces Techno and Phil had given to Ranboo, this one looked the newest. Ranboo looked up to find Techno regarding him with a look that couldn't quite be placed.

"Was it yours?" Ranboo asked. He slid his arm out of the shield.

"No," Techno said. Ranboo waited for him to continue, but he remained silent on the subject. Ranboo placed the shield down gently next to his things.

Techno showed him the right way to pack a bag, the heavier items resting at the bottom and tucked against each other like puzzle pieces. Their bedrolls were tightly wound and slid into the thin leather straps that hung off the lower portion of the packs. Eventually, when all that was left to pack was extra clothes and materials for potions, they ventured back upstairs.

Philza had condensed the various drawings, maps, and lists of landmarks into a few sheets of potential routes through the Nether. For a brief while, the landmarks Ranboo had noted took them on a fairly straightforward path, one Phil and Techno had traveled before. After a point, the familiarity wore off. They'd have to trust their tracking skills from there.

It was strange; Ranboo felt hunted, even though he'd already been found.

They made some food with the last of what fresh meat they had left to make sure it didn't spoil while they were away, and while they ate, Phil and Techno talked through the route once more. It seemed to Ranboo that they were talking more to each other than they were to him. They flipped open books, turned over pages, wrote down new notes. Phil paged through Ranboo's memory book, noting how the bastion he mentioned a few times could be all the same one if they were lucky, but if they weren't, the trip could drag on for a week more than they expected, if not more.

Ranboo wondered how long he'd traveled on his own in the Nether, if it would take them more time or less to follow his tracks back the way he'd come. He wondered how many times he'd gone in circles or passed the same woods twice, how many times he'd mistaken left for right. He wondered if he'd remember the way back if he could study the book as well. If he'd be able to track himself too. If he knew himself well enough to understand the ramblings and

nonsense like a first language, if it would be the same as when he discovered he could read Enchanted.

It was only when Techno snapped the book shut that Ranboo realized he'd been leaning forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the words he'd written down in the past. He hadn't done it intentionally, drawn in by a subconscious curiosity. The thud of the leather cover closing over the pages startled him out of his thoughts. Ranboo blinked slowly and looked up to find Phil and Techno both watching him intently.

"Sorry," Ranboo said. Phil raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm alright. I didn't realize... thank you for closing it," he muttered, shaking his head. Techno hummed in response, but he made no move to take his hand away from its place over the spiral pattern of the book's cover. Ranboo looked away, choosing to focus instead on the scraps of food left on his plate.

Even with the book closed and hidden from sight, a numb cold lingered in Ranboo's mind. He wondered if it lingered with Techno and Phil as well. If they felt it the same way he did.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, the second arc of this story begins :0

I wanna say, I am BLOWN AWAY by the support and interaction I got on the last chapter - as well as by the support I'm getting for this fic in general. The three chapters before this took a lot out of me to be honest since I'd been working on getting them perfect for so long, so it was so great to see that people really enjoyed them :D I know this chapter may seem a bit slower than the last few have been, but ya gotta keep good pacing, yanno? And besides, I think you're all going to really like where this story is going from here... good things come to those who wait ;)

Any and all feedback is much appreciated!!

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go! Thanks for reading!

7/1 - i had a very unfortunate death of a beloved pet, so the next chapter is going to be delayed some. much love for the support

7/3 - thank you for the well wishes and patience, I really appreciate it - I'm working on the next chapter still, about a third of the way done :)

7/4 - over the halfway point!

7/8 - fun fact, I'm also on a roadtrip of my own right now - still working on the next

chap, sorry it's been so long!! I promise im still updating :D

7/9 - :0 i think new chap is gonna be posted tonight at around 9pm est :000

Into Fire

Chapter Summary

“Any of it look familiar?” he asked. Ranboo shook his head. In his eyes, the light of the fire was reflected, making the color of his irises dance with orange and red. Techno peered down at the lava below. It gurgled and shifted, flowing slowly in neverending surges and spirals. Ranboo tilted his head at the sight. “You feel alright?” Techno asked. Ranboo slowly lifted his head and blinked the heat away.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Ranboo—” Techno began, but Ranboo cut him off.

“Really,” he said. “I’m not just saying that.” Ranboo looked up at him. His eyes looked clear and sharp, his pupils narrow. He looked back out over the lake. “Dream’s quiet.” Techno looked back at Phil, who let his wings fluff out in the wind.

Chapter Notes

Take ur bets now on how many road trip references are gonna be in the comments of this chapter. Also, thanks for being so patient waiting for it :) It's long, and hopefully worth it :)))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Techno was a child, he remembered the Piglins would tell stories of great black swirling portals of fire. They would chant songs of the terrible golden God who stepped through light from another world, who emerged from the land beyond and brought with him little more than plague and fire. To the Piglins, the Totem God had abandoned their world long before the God War. They had been abandoned since the world’s creation.

It had come as no surprise to Techno that the Nether hadn’t been the only realm left in destruction by the Totem God. Though he *had* been surprised to learn that the people of the Overworld considered the God to be benevolent, to be a master of healing and life and light.

He supposed it was all a matter of perspective.

Techno held no warmth in his heart to the Totem God of Undying. A benevolent being would not create a realm like the Nether.

The Piglins recited cautionary tales to their children about the portals, songs of illness and death to those who passed through them, songs of a great ball of fire that hung in the sky, a black abyss overhead, cold glass lava that would swallow you fast the moment you fell in.

When Phil had taken him through the portal for the first time, Techno had fully expected a world darker than blackstone and lit only by fiery death. When he stepped past the portal's surface, he wondered if this was the plague the Piglins had warned of. He felt as though his mind was being pulled through his ears, like all the breath had been stolen from his lungs. Phil told him he'd laid on the ground for nearly an hour before his senses came back to him and he realized he was, miraculously, still alive – though he could have sworn the feeling had lasted a lifetime longer.

Phil said he'd get used to portal travel with time. The more times he went through, the more he'd maintain his composure coming through the other side.

When they went through the portal now, Phil and Techno were both ready to catch Ranboo if he fell, waiting for the wave of dizziness and nausea to come over him. But when Ranboo stepped through the purple light, he emerged the other side with his balance intact, stepping off from the obsidian platform with so much surefootedness that Techno couldn't help but feel jealous. Even after a hundred or more times through a portal, he still felt the world swim in front of his eyes.

Ranboo cast a look back at him and Phil where they stood, still blinking the fog from their eyes, before looking around him at the red wasteland. Behind them were huge cliffs, in front a vast expanse of netherack and pools of lava. Chunks of quartz glinted in the light of fire. Ranboo didn't look shocked, but he also didn't look familiar with the place.

"Do you remember anything?" Phil asked after a long silence. Ranboo looked back towards them.

“No,” he said. His voice sounded hollow. He breathed in the hot air. “But I know I’ve been here. Not *here* , but...” Phil nodded.

“We need to get to the bastion,” Techno said, clearing his throat. “You’re a sitting duck without armor.”

“*Twenty.*”

“*Fifteen.*”

“*Seventeen.*”

“*Fifteen.*”

“*Sixteen, and that axe.*”

Techno snorted a laugh.

“*This axe is worth more than every block of gold in this bastion,*” he grunted. The piglin regarded the weapon and narrowed his eyes. “*Just ‘cus it’s not gold doesn’t mean it’s not sharp,*” Techno said, and was met with a huff. He sighed. “*Seventeen bars, and you throw in two clusters of Netherwart.*”

“*One cluster,*” the boar said.

“*No. Two clusters. Seventeen bars of gold is already too high,*” Techno said, rolling his eyes.

“The blood god thinks he can come and take whatever he wants?” the pig challenged. Techno adjusted his grip on his axe. Whatever look came across his face at that moment, it was enough to force the boar back a step, his squeal faltering.

“Do you want to find out why your people call me ‘blood god?’ ” Techno asked. There was no response. *“Seventeen bars and two clusters of Netherwart,”* Techno repeated, squaring his shoulders. After a long pause, the piglin grunted.

“It is a trade,” he said. He jerked his head back over his shoulder, and Techno followed him through the Bastion gates and down winding halls and stairs. Techno never understood why the Piglins set up their homes like mazes. The passages wound around in circles and ran into each other, or halted abruptly in dead end walls. No matter how far apart the herd, Piglins built the same fortresses again and again, all equally chaotic. Squeals and grunts echoed around the corners, and yet there was no one else to be seen in the passages they traveled now.

They walked through the maze of blackstone until they arrived at the armorer’s workshop. Techno watched as he placed the pieces of leather gear down on the stone table in front of him.

“They need to be adjusted,” Techno said. The boar grumbled at him.

“It will cost extra for custom,” he said. Techno waved him off.

“Just trim a finger or two off the sides and punch some holes so it can fit smaller.”

“Smaller?” Techno nodded. *“Are you traveling with a piglet?”* Techno didn’t answer. The piglin took a skiving knife to the edges of the bracers and greaves. *“Gold offers more protection than leather,”* he said as he worked.

“We don’t have time to get a gold set fitted,” Techno said. The piglin huffed.

“What is your rush? The Nether does not grow colder,” he said. Techno remained silent once again.

He didn’t have an answer. He didn’t know why, but he felt as though someone had lit a fire at his heels, urging him on. They didn’t have time to waste.

“I thought they were skeleton tracks,” Techno said. Phil leaned over and inspected the scuffs in the ash along the cliffside. There were only one or two little spots that remained of the tracks Techno had observed when he had gone hunting for hoglins. That felt like ages ago now.

“To be fair, they do look pretty similar,” he said with a shrug. “And you were pretty thin then,” he added, casting a look at Ranboo. “Though I don’t think I would have called you a *skeleton* .”

“That’s not what I meant...” Techno mumbled. Phil shrugged. Ranboo looked to the cliff face that stretched up as far as they could see until it reached the dark stone ceiling of the Nether. To their right was the same forest that Techno had seen the hoglin herd pass through. It was a dense wood, dotted with shroomlights and twisting gnarled vines. Forests were difficult to traverse, but Techno didn’t know if he would prefer that or the narrow path they had now before them.

Ranboo inched forward, peering over the side of the ledge. His hair was blown back by waves of heat that rose off of the lava lake below them. Out of the corner of his eye, Techno saw Phil’s hand twitch, reaching out just slightly, at the ready. Techno stepped forward toward Ranboo.

“Any of it look familiar?” he asked. Ranboo shook his head. In his eyes, the light of the fire was reflected, making the color of his irises dance with orange and red. Techno peered down at the lava below. It gurgled and shifted, flowing slowly in neverending surges and spirals. Ranboo tilted his head at the sight. “You feel alright?” Techno asked. Ranboo slowly lifted his head and blinked the heat away.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Ranboo—” Techno began, but Ranboo cut him off.

“Really,” he said. “I’m not just saying that.” Ranboo looked up at him. His eyes looked clear and sharp, his pupils narrow. He looked back out over the lake. “Dream’s quiet.” Techno looked back at Phil, who let his wings fluff out in the wind.

“That’s good, then,” Techno said. “I was hopin’ we wouldn’t have to tie you off to one of us with a rope.” Ranboo huffed a laugh, but narrowed his eyes.

“When you and Phil talked about the Nether, and the lava, I thought I’d be scared,” he said quietly. “Scared of falling in, you know? Though... it *is* a long way down...” Techno brought his hand up slowly, placing his fingers around Ranboo’s arm and drawing him back gently. Ranboo looked over at him, startled slightly by the touch, but he let himself be moved away from the ledge.

“Not sure that’s a good thing,” Phil said. “Healthy dose of fear keeps you alive, especially here.” Ranboo pushed his hair out of his eyes.

“I’ve already got a healthy dose of fear,” Ranboo said.

“Fair,” Phil shrugged, and Ranboo smiled slightly. Techno rolled his shoulders back.

“Make sure your boots are on tight,” Techno said. He walked toward the start of the ledge where it ran parallel to the cliff face. “Can’t stop halfway to tie your laces.” He nodded down toward Ranboo’s boots. The shoestring on one was already coming slightly undone. Ranboo pulled his ears back, kneeling to fix the knot while Phil and Techno shared a glance.

Passing so close to the lava lakes was something Techno had been worried about, and he was sure Phil was as well from the way the man hadn't fully tucked his wings away since the moment they got into the Nether, constantly ready to unfurl if he needed to. He'd expected keeping Ranboo safe to be much more of a challenge considering Dream's influence on his actions so far, but surprisingly, as Ranboo had said, Dream was quiet.

He didn't know if he should be comforted by this or skeptical.

He settled for a relieved paranoia.

Over the years, Techno had grown used to the sight of his friend taking off into the sky, his great black wings propelling him up in a way that was somewhere caught between natural and unusual. The way he moved made it look like flying should be every man's second nature, like if Techno tried hard enough and just put his mind to it, he'd be able to do it too, like somehow he'd sprout wings if he just *believed*. Phil made it look easy.

Techno was used to it, but Ranboo was not. He'd seen Phil take off only a few times, but each time he still stared up at the sky with awe in his eyes. This time was no different. He watched Phil glide away over the lava lake, his wings catching the updrafts. They watched as his form became a blur behind the waves of heat that distorted the air. Ranboo stared at the spot on the horizon where Phil had disappeared.

"Jealous?" Techno asked lightheartedly, and Ranboo looked back at him. They continued walking along the path they were on heading up the east coast of the lava lake.

"Aren't you?" Ranboo responded, and Techno shrugged.

"It would make traveling faster, that's for sure," he said. He adjusted the pack on his shoulders. "Wish Phil could just pick us up an' carry us with him."

“At least we’ll know we’re walking in the right direction?” Ranboo posited, and Techno hummed in agreement.

“Always the optimist,” Techno said, and Ranboo chirped. The feeling of the sound in his head made Techno smile. Ranboo was right, of course. Phil was able to fly out in search of their next landmark where the maps were unclear, making the tracking expedition much easier and, hopefully, much faster. It was difficult to tell from Ranboo’s memory books exactly how far he’d walked or for how long, so the length of the trip wasn’t easily estimated. The day before, they’d journeyed to the bastion for armor, and then headed northeast toward the waste that lay there. They’d found the lava lake that Ranboo had written of walking past. Supposedly, northwest there would be the remnant of an old bastion, long since abandoned.

Ranboo walked slightly in front of him, looking all around at the landscape. He’d remained constantly observant of his surroundings, no doubt looking for anything that might spark a memory or that might look familiar, but if he’d seen anything, he hadn’t mentioned it. There were a few moments where Techno thought there had been some recognition in his eyes, but when asked, Ranboo would just shake his head, that same look of guilt passing over his expression, one Techno wished he could wipe away forever. Now, Ranboo looked around like a child admiring the first snow of winter.

“I don’t think I’d like flying very much,” Techno mused, half to himself and half to Ranboo. Ranboo’s ear twitched in his direction, and he turned halfway to face him while he walked.

“Oh?” Ranboo’s tail swished. Techno kept worrying one of these days he was going to let it swing straight into lava or catch it ablaze on one of the many ever burning fires on the netherrack. The singed bit at the end had only just grown out since the kitchen fire. “Why’s that?” Ranboo asked.

“I’m not coordinated enough,” Techno huffed. “You should see some of the moves Phil pulls. In the wastes, flying is straightforward enough, but just wait until you watch him go through one of the basalt deltas. I’d run straight into a wall.” Ranboo stifled a laugh. “You know I’m right.”

“I’m sure I’d be much worse,” he said. Techno shrugged.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the way you hit your head on every low hanging ceiling you see.”

“I *don't* see them,” Ranboo said. “That’s the problem. If I saw them, I’d duck .” Techno snorted, covering his mouth with the back of one hand. Ranboo smiled. “I think I’d like flying,” he said quietly. “Phil always looks like he’s having so much fun. It looks so... *free*. ”

Ranboo looked out over the lava lake. His footsteps crunched softly, ash underfoot. Techno watched him, but said nothing. They’d walked past the pools of lava that dotted the Nether many times now, some vast expanses like this one, some bubbling far below them, some puddles sprung up from cracks in the ground, and each time Techno kept a close eye on Ranboo, waiting for any change in his demeanor, but it never came.

“Do you think we’ll really find something?” Ranboo asked after a long silence. “When we get to... wherever... you think there’ll be something there?” Ranboo didn’t look back at Techno when he spoke. He kept his gaze trained out over the lava.

“I do,” Techno said. His voice was sure. Ranboo’s ear twitched. “And even if we find nothing, we will have learned something.” Ranboo looked back at him, his expression confused. “Sometimes, what you don’t find is just as important as what you do,” Techno shrugged. “But we’re already makin’ progress.”

Ranboo nodded. They continued walking along the shoreline, passing by a herd of striders standing in the shallows of the lava. As they walked by, Techno nudged one of the smaller ones that stood on the coast back toward the lava, where it shook itself off and trotted along beside them for a few moments before returning to its group. After an hour or so, Techno’s ears pricked to the sound of beating wings.

He looked up to see Phil traveling back over the lake. He landed with a grunt and stood, ruffling his feathers out before folding his wings back down against his body. Techno held out his pack to him, and Phil rolled his eyes.

“Give me a moment, would ya?” Phil muttered, catching his breath.

“It’s heavy,” Techno said bluntly.

“You’ll live,” Phil said. He stuck his hands onto his hips and pulled his shoulders back, cracking his back. Techno raised his eyebrows.

“Getting old?” he asked. Phil looked at him with venom. He grabbed the pack from Techno’s hands roughly, and Techno smirked.

“You make me age,” Phil said. He opened up the top flap of the backpack and pulled out a metal water jug with a leather cover. He unscrewed the lid and took a swig, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Did you find it?” Ranboo asked. Phil nodded as he put the bottle back.

“It’s further north than we thought, but it’s there,” he said. Ranboo looked relieved, as he did every time they found the next milestone and trail marker. Phil pulled out the map they’d been keeping of the area, one that was accurate in proportion and landmarks so that their path back home would be made quicker. He began to draw in the next portion of the area beyond the lake and up to the bastion.

“And it was abandoned?” Techno asked. Phil nodded. “Good. Makes things easier.”

“We follow the lake until it starts to curve back east,” Phil said, penciling in the coastline. “And then we head straight north as the crow flies. It’s mostly plains up until the end, and then we need to climb a bit—”

Techno felt himself moving almost before he even heard the cry from the ghaſt. The beaſt wailed, and he already had pulled Ranboo’s ſhield from his hand, pulling Phil back from the edge of the lake and bracing himſelf for the impact from the fire.

When it hit, he felt himſelf ſlide back on the netherrack, the ſhield ſmoking ſlightly where the blaſt had hit it. Phil had already drawn his ſword by the time Techno was thruſting the ſhield back into Ranboo’s hands.

“Keep it held high,” Techno said, and Ranboo obeyed with wide eyes, holding the shield with a white knuckle grip against his chest. The ghaſt ſcreeched. Of all the places to encounter a ghaſt, this was the worſt. There was nowhere to hide here, ſurrounded by flat waſteland, but it ſeemed Phil had underſtood that as well. He ſpread his wings and launched himſelf upwards, toward the ghaſt that floated now in view over the lake, drawing its fire toward him.

Techno unſtrapped his crossbow from his pack, the bolt already notched. He tugged the weapon free, ſetting the butt againſt his ſhoulder where it fell perfectly ſlotted in the groove of his armor. He aimed. Phil danced like a leaf around the ghaſt, and the ghaſt wailed as it ſpat more blaſts out of its red mouth. Techno heard one of them hit the ſhore to their right, and Ranboo yelped in ſurprise. The ghaſt ſpun in the air, trying to track Phil as he circled it. He flew cloſe, ſwiping his blade across the creature’s ſide, and it ſcreamed, eyes blazing with fire.

Techno lined up his ſhot. He ſhouted a warning, and Phil tucked his wings and dove toward the lake, ſtraight down. Techno heard Ranboo draw a breath and hold it. The ghaſt took its aim at Phil below it and holding ſtill juſt long enough for Techno to looſe his ſhot.

It ſtruck true, ſtraight into the ghaſt’s left eye. With a wail, it fell from the ſky ſlowly. Phil ſpread his wings again and flew out of the way as it ſunk toward the lava that ſwallowed it up with a gurgle. Techno ſtared at the ſpot where it went under for a moment, waiting juſt to be ſure. He’d never ſeen a ghaſt riſe up again once it fell, but there was no ſuch thing as too careful when it came to the Nether. After a long ſilence punctuated only by the bubbling lava, Techno let the tension fall from his ſhoulders and held the crossbow at his ſide.

As Phil flew cloſe again to land, Techno turned back to look at Ranboo, who was ſtill holding the ſhield tight to his body.

“You alright?” Techno aſked, and Ranboo ſlowly let the ſhield lower before nodding. “Not blown up?” Ranboo ſhook his head. Techno ſighed. Phil landed beſide him, whiſtling as he did.

“Waſn’t expecting that,” Phil ſaid. He rolled his ſhoulders. “Hope I waſn’t the one that led it back here...”

“You’d have noticed if a ghaſt was following you,” Techno ſaid. He pulled a new bolt from the pouch on his pack and notched it into the crossbow, loading it for future uſe.

“That... that was a ghaſt?” Ranboo aſked. Techno glanced in his direction.

“Oh, right,” he ſaid, “I guess you don’t remember ſeein’ one before.”

“I read about them, I juſt...” Ranboo looked back out over the lake. “I thought they’d be ſmaller.” Techno huffed a laugh, ſhrugging his ſhoulders.

“Yeah, pictures don’t really do ‘em juſtice,” he ſaid. “You remember the ſound it made when it ſhowed up juſt now?” Ranboo nodded. “If you hear that again, get that ſhield up quick. Write that down.” Ranboo nodded again, this time more intently, before fiſhing into his bag to pull out his memory book.

“Eat up,” Phil ſaid, paſſing plates to Ranboo and Techno. “It’s no hoglin roaſt, but it’s not my worſt work.” Techno took his portion, a few ſmoked pieces of beef jerky and a pile of thick roaſted crimson roots, criſped perfectly.

“Only you could find a way to complain about food like this, Phil,” Techno ſaid. Phil had a few ſimple pleasures he would not give up in life no matter the circumſtance, and good food was one of them. It helped that he was a fantaſtic cook. “When I was a kid, we uſed to ſuck the marrow out of ſkeleton bones when food was ſhort,” Techno ſaid abſentmindedly as he bit into the thick ſmoked jerky.

“Bone marrow is a delicacy in ſome regions,” Phil ſaid. Techno rolled his eyes.

“Next time we ſee a ſkeleton, I’ll make ſure you try ſome and then you can tell me how much of a *delicacy* it is,” Techno grunted.

“Maybe if I were there, I could have prepared it the right way. Make some broth, or spread it over bread?”

“We didn’t have *wheat*, Phil. How would we have spread it over bread? Look around and tell me how you’d grow wheat in a place like this,” Techno said. Phil glanced around him at the ruins of the bastion that they’d set up camp in, dark cracked blackstone crumbling around them. Light filtered in through slats in the walls. Phil opened his mouth, thought for a moment, and then closed it. He heard Ranboo stifle a laugh, and looked over to find the kid chewing on the end of a roasted crimson root.

“Could you grow any crops?” Ranboo asked. Techno nodded, tearing away more of his jerky.

“Oh, yeah. Not carrots or beets, of course, but we grew loads of fungi and sprouts underground, netherwart and crimson fungus and warped roots,” Techno said.

“Underground?” Ranboo asked.

“They kept fresh longer when they were grown out of the heat,” Techno explained. “We’d plant them in soul soil and the sprouts would draw in whatever moisture they could find. Those farms were the only place I ever felt like I was breathing fresh air in a place like this,” Techno said. He felt nostalgia slipping into his voice and cleared his throat.

“So did you do a lot of farming?” Ranboo asked, and Phil nearly choked on his food. Techno laughed.

“Not even remotely,” Techno said. “Only reason I’m good with the farms is ‘cus Phil showed me how. I killed every plant I touched at first. But as a kid, I was a hunter through and through.”

“You were young though, weren’t you?” Ranboo asked. Techno nodded, taking another bite. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Whole world’s dangerous. All the piglets learned how to shoot a crossbow, hold a sword, swing an axe,” Techno said. “And a boar’s tusk to the chest is a good way to get thick skin,” Techno said, thumping a fist against his shoulder.

“Good way to die young, too,” Phil mumbled, and Techno shrugged.

“Must have been weird going to the overworld after living here,” Ranboo said. “Especially living in the tundra.”

“We didn’t start out in the tundra, actually,” Phil said, leaning back against the black brick wall behind him. “The first portal I took Techno out of was quite a bit further north.” Ranboo raised his eyebrows.

“Still felt freezin’ to me, though,” Techno said. “And the air was so thick.”

“Humidity,” Phil said with a nod. “You thought you were dying,” he chuckled.

“Why are you laughing? That was terrifying for me,” Techno said. He turned back to Ranboo. “Piglins tell stories about the overworld, about the portals– we’ve got this illness that we called *the rot*, skin falls off the bone and turns all green and...” Techno watched Ranboo’s expression grow nauseated. “Sorry,” he muttered. “Anyway, they said piglins who went through the portal died to the plague as soon as they went through, so when *I* went through and the first things that happened were, one, I was knocked on my ass, and two, I couldn’t breathe right... you can see why I was a bit concerned.”

“So it’s not true, then? The thing about the plague?” Ranboo asked.

“Well, I’m still standin’,” Techno said with a smirk. “But I’m not full piglin. I only went through ‘cus Phil told me he’d seen other piglin hybrids in the overworld, walking around with their skin still stuck to their bones, so... what did I have to lose?” Techno crunched into one of his roasted roots. “But it could be true for all I know,” he said with his mouth half full. “No piglins ever go through the portals, so it’s a difficult theory to prove.”

Ranboo nodded as he took another bite.

When Ranboo picked up Phil's sword, Techno didn't know what he should expect.

Some part of him anticipated seeing that blank look in his eyes, the narrow pupils, the glaze that washed over him when he heard Dream's voice, his mind a thousand miles away. He wondered if Ranboo would turn the blade on Phil or Techno, as the kid had feared he would if he ever picked up a weapon, if Techno would have to defend himself like he'd promised he'd be able to do.

He could take Ranboo in a fight, but he didn't want to. And when Ranboo scooped up the sword from the ground, holding it in a grip so tight it could shatter glass, Techno found himself pleading with whatever higher power might be listening that when Ranboo looked up he'd still be himself behind those eyes.

Techno had been hunting hoglins. He'd lured one away from its herd, far enough that the others wouldn't hear their fight. Hoglins had a tendency to lock onto their target, which thankfully made them easy to draw out. Techno had drawn this one back near where Ranboo and Phil were camped out at the edge of the warped forest waiting for him just in case, so that if he needed an assist from Phil he'd have it. An injury close to home was one thing, but four days out, it was a risk Techno didn't want to take.

He'd killed the beast with no issue. An axe to the head finished it off quickly, and it fell to the ground with a thud. He'd landed a few crossbow bolts beforehand as well, two of them sticking into the hoglin's shoulder and side, but the third had whizzed over its head, where it landed squarely in the chest of a zombified piglin.

The first feeling he felt was exasperation. The second was dread.

He sunk his axe into the hoglin, getting it off of his trail first, and then started running towards Phil and Ranboo. Piglins that had succumbed to the rot still retained their instincts, which meant that when you struck one of them, they all went after you. And they didn't care if it was really you or not; anything that moved was considered a threat. They blazed a path until they had nothing left to kill, and eventually then their grunts and wails quieted down until they forgot what they were even angry about in the first place.

But here, they had no place to hide. So there they were, with Phil and Techno flanking Ranboo on either side, cutting down the creatures that used to be piglins one by one. The herd wasn't as large as others Techno had encountered; they were sparse in forests, no longer agile enough to navigate all the winding roots and tree limbs that jutted out. This herd was only eleven.

Phil took out the nearest two with a single sword swipe through both of their necks and turned his blade on the third which had unfortunately died wearing armor. He ran his blade through a gap by its armpit, and as he was pulling the sword out of its body, Techno handled the ones that were coming up on him from behind and then turned to throw his dagger past Ranboo. It landed neatly in between the eyes of the piglin that was there.

Ranboo kept his shield up. He had more instincts for defending himself than Techno expected at first, staying aware of which piglin was where and how fast it was approaching. One swiped at his shield with its bare hands, and he rammed his shield into it hard enough to make it fall backwards, where Techno swung down hard on its head.

"Good hit," he grunted, and Ranboo nodded fiercely. It might have made him laugh if it wasn't immediately followed by a shout from Phil that made them both turn. He'd been knocked off balance, tumbling to the ground with one piglin on top of him and a second closing in, his sword laying a foot out of reach. Techno lurched to help him, but found himself cut off by a sword swinging in his direction from his left, which he blocked at the last second purely on instinct. He grunted, cursing under his breath.

He swung his axe into the shoulder of the piglin swinging at him, lodging it at an angle so hard that he nearly cut its head free from its body, and planted his foot on its chest and pushed hard to wrench his weapon free.

When he turned, he saw Ranboo lifting Phil's sword from the ground.

Phil's sword was netherite. It was sharp enough to cut through bone in one clean slice, heavy enough to crack open a skull. Ranboo held it in his hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, like it was weightless.

Techno froze where he stood. He watched as Ranboo paused for a split second, his eyes lingering on the sword in his hand, glancing from the tip of the dark metal blade all the way down to the grip. At the pommel, there was a dark green emerald, a twin to the one that was set in the eye of Techno's axe. The gem glinted under the shroomlights.

Then, Ranboo drove the blade straight through the throat of the piglin that was on top of Phil.

He pivoted on his heel as though it was as easy as walking and wrenched his arm sideways, tearing through flesh like butter until the sword found its mark in the head of the approaching piglin on his left. Both creatures dropped like stones.

Techno threw his axe at the final one that approached Ranboo from the side, and it struck it in the chest. He turned to Ranboo before the last piglin had even fallen all the way to the ground. Ranboo stood silent, his breath worryingly quiet, the sword hanging loosely at his side. Techno remained where he stood, a few feet away, watching.

Phil shoved the body of the piglin off of himself, standing cautiously. Techno felt like they were both moving in slow motion, as if Ranboo was a snake that could strike at any moment. The kid's chest moved slowly with each breath and his tail flicked out behind him, dragging soft lines through the dirt.

"Ranboo?" Phil asked cautiously. Ranboo inhaled deeply and then let it out with a sigh. His tail slowed, and he looked up at Phil.

"I'm alright," Ranboo said, answering a question that hadn't yet been asked. He looked back down at the sword in his hand and blinked at it before adjusting his grip and holding it out blade down for Phil. "Here. Sorry."

“Are you sure you’re good?” Techno said as Phil tentatively taking the sword from Ranboo, who released it easily and nodded.

“I, um...” Ranboo looked down at the zombified piglins he’d slain. “I don’t know how I did that.” Techno didn’t have an answer for him. He couldn’t believe it himself. He’d never expected Ranboo to move so easily with a sword in his hand, a kid who was so awkwardly gangly and still uncomfortably skinny for his height. Ranboo, who tripped over air and hit his head on anything low enough, had wielded a sword like it was an extension of his own arm.

Techno supposed he’d never had a reason to hold a weapon before while he was with them. In the tundra, it was rare to see a threat willing to venture out of the forest, and even in the trees there weren’t often mobs close enough to be an issue. When he’d refused the dagger, Techno had assumed he’d never used one before, but now that he thought about it, the assumption wasn’t necessarily true. Clearly.

And while he didn’t like to think on it for very long, he knew Ranboo was stronger than he looked. In the village, he’d snapped Ilya’s arm in his bare hand with little more than a twitch of his muscle. Techno wondered what he would be capable of in a true fight. He was beginning to wonder if this was why Ranboo had such a fear of hurting them, but Ranboo didn’t seem to expect it either, shocked by his own prowess with a blade.

“Well, thank you,” Phil said. He holstered his sword and brushed dirt and nylum residue off of his back and legs. “Don’t know if I would have had that one handled.” Ranboo nodded, but his focus remained on the two zombified piglins that laid by his feet. Techno walked over, laying a hand gently on his shoulder. To his surprise, Ranboo didn’t startle.

“They were already dead,” Techno said. “Don’t feel too bad for ‘em.” As far as he knew, it was true. Piglins who caught the rot quickly lost themselves to it, no longer able to communicate, to recognize friend from foe, to feel anything. They were shells. If they weren’t so aggressive when attacked, they would be killed out of mercy, but instead they roamed free, abandoned into the wastes of the Nether.

Ranboo swallowed. He nodded, his head only barely moving, before looking away from the bodies and adjusting his pack on his shoulders.

“Come on. We need to get moving. We shouldn’t hang around here too long,” Techno said, letting his hand slide off of Ranboo’s arm.

“They say the Totem God built the portals first to teach the enchanters how to pass between realms. He crafted them from slabs of obsidian and perfectly carved out the centers, and lit them with fire from the stars.

“Then he taught the enchanters how to carve obsidian, but they couldn’t without cracking their picks. So he taught them how to enchant their tools so they wouldn’t break, and they were able to stack chunks of obsidian and seal them together with melted gold.

“And when the God War came, and the end was sealed off, they say the shockwave made the whole world cry, even the obsidian. That’s why it leaks purple tears. It’s crying for the God of Undying to return.”

“Who says that?” Ranboo asked.

“I dunno,” Phil said. “They.”

“Who’s they?” Ranboo asked.

“People. Books. Songs.”

“Songs?”

“People like to sing about things.”

“Do you know any?”

“I don’t sing,” Phil said with a soft smile. “Techno does, though.”

Techno and Phil took turns taking watch at night since Ranboo couldn’t be left up alone. While Dream had been in large part quiet during the trip so far, they wouldn’t let their guard down. They didn’t want to wake up to an empty sleeping roll beside them.

It was the seventh day since they’d left home. Progress was slow, but it was progress. On more than one occasion now they’d run into unfamiliar territory, but it was anyone’s guess if they’d truly gone the wrong way or if there was just missing time from Ranboo’s memory book. After a while, Phil would fly out to see what he could see, and Ranboo and Techno would simply need to stop and wait for his report after returning.

Techno had confidently led them astray more than once. It put a dent in his ego, but he only had scraps to go off of. It wasn’t like they could follow tracks. Ranboo had walked through these areas over a month ago at the very least, almost certainly more since he doubled back and lingered in one spot for as long as he could— or for as long as he felt safe.

Techno was surprised at how easily sleep came to Ranboo. Phil he expected; the man could sleep like a rock wherever he wanted, a skill Techno frequently envied, but he’d been concerned about Ranboo. The kid was jittery and on edge before the trip, understandably so, but when they’d begun their trip, he seemed more determined, more willing. He wanted answers, Techno assumed. Same as him and Philza.

Techno blinked out at the entrance to the alcove they’d stowed themselves away in for the night. It was a small hollow in the side of a cliff of netherack that went surprisingly deep. The roof was just high enough for Techno to stand in, though his head brushed the netherack overhead, which of course meant Ranboo had to hunch. Phil didn’t like being under a ceiling so low, but Techno had managed to convince him that it was better to be a little claustrophobic for a few hours than to face the dangers of being out in the open. Still, Phil stuck to the southern end of the cave where the ceiling was highest. Ranboo slept tucked against the back of the cave behind the smouldering remains of the campfire they’d used to cook dinner.

Out in the wasteland, the wind kicked up dust and ash. It swirled in patterns along the ground. With one entrance, keeping watch was hardly a difficult task, and it had always been easy for Techno to stay awake. It was a skill he learned young, how to keep himself alert, and even in the safety that the Overworld and the tundra offered, it had been sharply maintained. But in the Nether, he found sleep much more attainable. It was too quiet in the Overworld. Here, with some constant buzz of wind or lava or the distant cries of a ghaſt, he found comfort in ſound. It was a different ſort of awareness. In the tundra, he had to wonder if there was ſomething out there, ſomething quiet, lurking. Here, it made itſelf known always.

Techno adjusted his poſture, ſtretching his legs out and leaning back on the palms of his hands, watching the aſh ſwirl outside. The air was hot and dry and ſmelled juſt ſlightly like ſomething burning. In the baſe of his ſkull, he felt a familiar feeling like cracking a knuckle, a ſoft warble hanging in the air. Techno glanced back to look at Ranboo.

The kid ſtill appeared aſleep. Sometimes, he made thoſe noiſes when he ſlept. Techno always wondered if it was a reaction to a dream or if it was ſimply an idle noiſe. He ſtudied Ranboo carefully, watching his cheſt riſe and fall in a ſteady rhythm. Behind his eyelids, his eyes were moving, darting around. His expreſſion looked ſour. As Techno watched, Ranboo's breathing became more ſhallow.

Techno ſtood, putting one hand on the ceiling above him to make ſure he didn't hit his head. He waited for a moment, caſting a glance to Phil who ſlept with one wing draped over his head to block out the conſtant light of the Nether. Ranboo warbled again, and Techno turned his attention back to him. He was dreaming, it ſeemed, but Techno never knew if he ſhould wake Ranboo when he dreamt or leave him be. So far, the kid had either woken himſelf up half dazed, rolled over, and went back to ſleep, or he ſimply quieted back down. Now, though, he didn't ſeem to be doing either. Techno hesitated for a moment before calling out in a huſhed voice.

"Ranboo," he whispered, hoping it would be juſt enough to wake him without ſtartling him. He didn't get a reſponse. "Hey," he ſaid, "Ranboo." Ranboo didn't wake, but inſtead ſettled his head further againſt the backpack he was uſing as a pillow. He drew in a breath, longer, leſs ſhallow, and ſeemed to calm. Techno watched as his cheſt returned to its normal riſe and fall and waited, patiently, but the kid ſeemed to have calmed down again in his ſleep.

Techno ſighed. He turned to look down at the campfire, which ſtill had a few ſmall charcoals ſmouldering ſoftly in the heat. Fire was difficult in the Nether; it never ſeemed to want to die.

He supposed it made sense, in a way. He knelt down to poke at the embers, prodding them with the calloused tips of his fingers, hardly feeling the heat against his skin. He turned one over so the smouldering side would face down and hopefully die out.

Then, there was a clawed hand gripping his arm so tight he wondered if it would pierce his skin. He snapped his head to find himself face to face with Ranboo, now sitting bolt upright, his eyes narrowed to hardly visible slits against the swirling color of his irises. Techno shoved down the immediate instinct to rip his arm away or to reach for his axe. The buzz of adrenaline hummed in his ears at being startled, and the feeling was made stronger by the way Ranboo stared at him now— not quite *at* him, though, more *past* him. He swallowed, pushing past the initial shock, and brought his other hand up slowly to rest on Ranboo's. As he did, the boy's pupils seemed to widen slightly outwards.

"Hey," Techno said, not sure what else to say. "It's me," he said, softer now. "It's Techno." Ranboo continued to stare. His eyes were the only thing to express his emotion; despite the blank look on his face, his pupils continued to almost pulse, widening and constricting like a flickering flame. "Ranboo?"

At hearing his name, Ranboo's pupils dilated slowly until they were blown wide, and he drew in a shuddering breath as though he'd been holding it since he woke.

"It's here," Ranboo said, his voice hardly there. Techno's stomach dropped. It was exactly what he didn't want to hear. "It— it's here, Techno, it— it's here, it's *here*," he whined.

"It's okay," Techno said. He hoped that was true. "I'm right here. You're okay."

"No," Ranboo said, shaking his head. As he did, Techno cast another glance to Phil, who still remained soundly asleep. If Techno shouted, he was sure he could wake him up, but Ranboo dug his nails in further and Techno turned his head back. "It's trying to bring me back, it's got me," Ranboo insisted.

"It doesn't," Techno said. "You're right here with me—" Ranboo brought his other hand up, the hand that wasn't gripping Techno's arm, and Techno cut himself off to grab it by the wrist. Ranboo had already carved enough gashes into his face. Techno wouldn't let him add any more. Ranboo pulled weakly against him. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“No, *no*, you don’t understand, you don’t, you– he won’t let me go, he’s *here* –” Ranboo was becoming frantic. Techno brought his hand down lower, pulling Ranboo’s claws away from his face. Ranboo breathed in shallow, shaky breaths.

“Ranboo,” Techno said as gently as he could, despite the panic he felt. Ranboo opened his eyes, but didn’t meet his gaze.

“*Please*, ” Ranboo pleaded, and Techno felt a pang in his chest. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to say, how to help. Dream wasn’t there, not really, but to Ranboo, it might as well have been the only *real* thing that mattered. “I can’t– I *can’t*. It’s trying to pull me back, Techno,” Ranboo whispered. Techno took a breath, slowing his mind.

“You’re awake, Ranboo. Dream isn’t here. I’m here, and Phil is here, and you and me, we’re awake,” Techno said, keeping his voice steady and certain for Ranboo’s sake. The kid shook his head weakly. “You trust me right?” Techno ducked his head slightly, trying to catch Ranboo’s gaze, but he was unsuccessful. Ranboo kept his sight trained on his hands, one still gripped on Techno’s arm, the other held still in Techno’s grasp.

Eventually, Ranboo nodded.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Techno said. “I told you I would.” He hesitated. “Remember?” *Remember* was a dangerous word to use around Ranboo. It was a reminder, an unknown, a question that never had a sure answer. He waited.

Eventually, Ranboo nodded again.

“You’re awake. You’re alright,” Techno said, running his thumb over Ranboo’s wrist. Ranboo’s grip on his arm loosened slowly, his claws releasing from where they’d pricked into his skin. Ranboo was silent and motionless for a long moment, his breathing becoming steady, soft. The tension in his shoulders released, and he looked up to meet Techno’s eye.

His pupils were narrower again, not quite the slits they were when he woke up, but closer to what Techno was used to seeing while they were in the Nether, adjusted to the constant glow of fire and light. Ranboo blinked a few times, and Techno watched him, waiting for some cue, some sign one way or another.

“I’m alright,” Ranboo said finally, and Techno felt like he could breathe. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t,” Techno said gently, and Ranboo looked down, the panic faded from his expression. “You’re okay?” Techno asked, and Ranboo nodded. “You’re sure?” He nodded again.

“It was a nightmare,” Ranboo said. “I think it was a nightmare.”

“Do you want to write it down?” Techno offered.

“I...” Ranboo paused. “I don’t remember it anymore,” he said. Techno did his best not to react, just nodding, but he saw the exhaustion in Ranboo’s eyes. He looked tired. His face was smudged with ash, now hunched and half awake.

“None of it?” Techno asked.

“No,” Ranboo said, his answer definitively final.

“Okay,” Techno said simply. “Can you look at me?” Ranboo complied, looking up again to meet Techno’s gaze. Techno released Ranboo’s wrist and brought his hand up to the kid’s cheek, wiping away ash with his thumb. Ranboo remained still, motionless but tense. Techno lowered his hand. “Do you want to try to go back to sleep?” he asked. Ranboo nodded, looking away again. “Okay,” Techno said again, slowly beginning to stand from his place kneeling by Ranboo.

“Can...” Ranboo said, and Techno paused. “Can you stay close?” he asked.

“Of course,” Techno said. He shuffled over to sit with his back to the wall next to Ranboo, his legs out in front of him. As he did, Ranboo began to lie back down, staring out toward the entrance to the cave. Techno didn’t know how long he laid there with his eyes open, watching, before he fell asleep again, but at some point when he looked back to Ranboo, the kid’s eyes were closed and he was breathing softly.

They’d have to tell Phil in the morning, of course. Phil would probably berate Techno for not waking up, or at least he’d probably want to. Techno didn’t know if he’d say it in front of Ranboo, though. It had been a while since Ranboo had been so thoroughly scared by Dream. Techno wondered what the nightmare was that had caused him to panic, to have him so convinced something was wrong. It was a conversation for the morning. For now, Techno watched the cave entrance, keeping his hearing tuned to the sound of Ranboo’s breath.

“They recognize you,” Techno said. Ranboo blinked at him in disbelief. “They said you’ve been here once before.”

“What... why? Why was I here?” Ranboo asked. Techno turned back to the four piglins who were facing them. Two of them stood directly in front of them, and the other two were spread out more to either side, flanking them. Techno was familiar with the tactic. They blocked off the path toward the bastion to keep the others in the herd safe. It didn’t make him feel any less like a herded animal, though.

“Apparently passing through,” Techno said. “*When?*” He asked the piglins.

“*Long time back,*” the sow that stood in front of them closer to Phil huffed. She was the taller of the two, more lean than either of the boars, and her crossbow was a clear indicator she was leading the hunt. “*When the red mushrooms were upturned.*”

“About four months ago,” Techno translated.

“*He acted sick,*” said the boar to Techno’s left. “*We thought he had the rot.*”

“But he lives,” said the taller sow. *“And he has found new gold.”* Techno raised an eyebrow.

“What gold did he have before?” Techno asked.

“A crown.”

There were times when Ranboo remembered. It wasn't quite a full memory. A familiarity. An instinct. At a fork in the paths in front of them, he would lead them confidently to one way or another. He knew there would be a structure over the next hill, but he couldn't recall what. He knew the fortress they came upon would have a way they could cross to the mountain's other side.

It was only ever in the immediate moment, just as they were coming upon a landmark or as they needed to make a decision. They had little else to go on, and he was never wrong. He didn't know what they'd find next, only that they would find *something*. Something to lead them on.

Techno nearly didn't believe it when they saw the portal. They came upon the end of the treeline in the warped forest, picking their way past vines and over roots, and on the flat top of a distant hill, Techno spotted the pitch black structure. Glimmering particles rose from the purple surface of the portal, and even from so far off, it couldn't be mistaken.

They knew they were near the end of their journey even before seeing the portal, though. After the forest, there were no more clues, no hint as to what came before in Ranboo's memory book. And even then, Techno wasn't sure that they would find anything at the end of the trail in the first place. The beginning of Ranboo's journey was written down in frantic, disjointed words, chaotic and, more often than not, illegible. They found one or two hints at best, a mention of vines or a footnote about bricks. As their trip had reached its ninth day,

Techno was beginning to wonder if they would end up wandering the Nether for weeks trying to find some clue or semblance of a sign in the right direction.

Ranboo's intuition helped, though; Sometimes, it was all they could call upon to guide them with Phil exhausted from flying so often and for so long. And now here they were, at the end of the line with only one possible path left to travel.

Techno turned behind him to Ranboo, who was staring wide eyed and frozen at the portal. Techno was sure Ranboo had felt the same as him, though probably throughout the whole trip. While he had been trying diligently not to voice his anxieties and cynicisms about the trip, Techno knew he still felt that fear the whole time they traveled that they wouldn't find anything, that this would be for nothing. That he'd never get answers.

That this would be forever.

Techno wouldn't let it be forever. They had sworn to help, sworn to protect him, no matter what that meant, and Techno was a man who kept his word. Or at least, he liked to believe he was. He would keep this promise, that much he knew.

"That's where we're going, then," Phil said, finally breaking the stunned silence that the three of them had fallen into. "Right?"

"Has to be," Techno said with a nod. "There's nowhere left to go." Ranboo gulped. "Look familiar?" Techno asked, and Ranboo's ears pulled back slightly, just as they always did when he was asked that question. Techno almost felt bad asking it, but it was a necessary evil.

Ranboo opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He nodded instead.

"Good or bad?" Phil asked. Sometimes, familiar was just familiar; it had no real weight to it. But other times, familiar meant fear, danger, a memory that wasn't there but who's feeling still lingered.

“I don’t know,” Ranboo said quietly after a pause. “It’s...” He squinted, and then looked out across the landscape. “I don’t know.” Techno hummed. If it wasn’t good, then it was bad. Not many things in the world were black or white, but this was one of them. The place came with enough lingering emotion to cause confusion at least, and at worst, some feeling Ranboo was reluctant to share.

“Well,” Phil said, stretching his arms out in front of him. “No point delaying the inevitable, right?” His tone was lighthearted, but Techno could see how it made Ranboo wince. He briefly considered reaching out to pat Ranboo on the shoulder, but he remembered how Ranboo had tensed two nights ago after his nightmare and decided against it.

“Let’s go see what’s on the other side,” Techno said. Techno was aching to know. They all were. Ranboo took a breath, let it out, and nodded. They began to walk.

Chapter End Notes

chanting: road trip road trip road trip road trip—

thanks for being patient while I worked on this!! writing this chapter was actually pretty difficult for me but i really hope it turned out well!!

ALSO!! Some of you lovely readers have mentioned that you've been drawing fanart of this fic! First of all, i'm shocked and honored.

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go! I think the next chapter should be out in a week ish? Def planning on updating sooner than I did for this one. Thanks for reading!

7/12 - started on the next chapter!! already 2.5k words in 0.0 took a break for a day to write a oneshot... go peep that... if u want..... :0

7/15 - im on vacation :0 but the grind never stops. Still working! I've got half of it done, working more tonight and tomorrow 🙌🙌

7/17 – it is my sincerest intent to post the next chapter tonight,, will it happen? who knows. hopefully. keep ya fingers crossed.

The Last Enchanter

Chapter Summary

“A golem means people,” Phil commented. “Or it means there were people recently, at least.” Ranboo cast a look back at him and nodded, but his face still remained slightly wary. The golem looked old and worn, weathered from years of service. “It’s rusty,” Phil said. He could see the dark reddish brown that accumulated over its body even from a distance. Even the one at the east village hadn’t started rusting like that, and it had been there far longer than Techno had been visiting.

As they got closer, Techno’s pace faltered. He slowed, tilting his chin up slightly at the sight of the golem, confusion spreading over his features, and then eventually, clarity.

“Phil, that... it’s not rust,” Techno said.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil knew that objectively, this was a temperate climate. It was sunny, there was no snow, light wisps of clouds scattered through the sky. The trees were covered in bright green and yellow leaves, sparse and far apart, and the grass was dotted with wildflowers and patches of rich, dark soil. If they had popped out into the oak wood straight from the tundra, Phil probably would have started shedding layers right away, basked in the sun, spread his wings out to soak in as much of the warm light as he could.

But right out of the Nether, it felt freezing. After adjusting to the heat and dry air in that fiery landscape for so many days, stepping out into the new biome felt like being dunked in ice water. The air felt dense, the breeze freezing, and Phil wrapped his wings around himself like a blanket to stave off the shiver that worked its way down his spine and made his hair stand on end.

Techno took a moment to clear his throat, letting his lungs adjust to the new humidity, and Ranboo ran his hands up and down his arms against the chill of the air.

“It’ll feel normal again in a few minutes,” Phil reassured him.

“It feels so weird,” Ranboo muttered.

“Now you get how I felt comin’ here for the first time,” Techno said. “Except it was my first time *ever* bein’ somewhere so cold.”

Ranboo nodded with a hum. He looked around them, and Phil took the opportunity to do the same.

They were in an oak forest, though he didn’t know if he would really call it a *forest*. Compared to the densely packed evergreens in the tundra, this felt like open air. The leaves were thin and broad, casting dappled shadows on the ground. It was mid-day and the sun was high in the sky. Phil looked around him, taking in more of the landscape, but he was interrupted.

“There’s a path,” Techno said. Phil turned. He was right; on the other side of the portal than they’d come out of, there was a path of overgrown cobblestone. Several spots were covered in moss or grass, the upkeep long since abandoned, but it was still visible, trailing off into the woods and curving around trees as it went. “That’s...” Techno paused. “Convenient,” he finished. Phil nodded. He turned to Ranboo.

Ranboo was looking down the path, glancing off into the trees, and then back at the portal before his gaze returned to the cobblestone walk before them. He looked almost confused, his eyes narrow.

“I think... I think I remember this...” he said. Phil and Techno looked at each other, then back to Ranboo. Ranboo took a step toward the path, but hesitated.

“Do you remember something specific?” Phil prompted. Ranboo was silent for a moment, considering the question.

“No,” he said eventually. “Just... it’s familiar. More familiar than before.” Ranboo dropped his arms from where he had been holding himself to warm up. The sun was helping to return them back to a normal sense of temperature. “It’s this way, I think.”

“It?” Techno asked. “What’s *it* ?” Ranboo paused again. His expression was difficult to read, as it had often been fairly recently, especially when he thought he recognized something. It was like he was searching for the right emotion, the right words to say what he needed to say.

“I don’t know,” Ranboo said. Techno furrowed his brow.

“Alright,” he said cautiously. They were flying blind now, so to speak. There was nothing left in Ranboo’s memory books for them to go off of, no more landmarks or clues. The portal was where his journey had seemingly started. But all they could do now was trust and see where Ranboo’s spotty memory guided them.

“At least it’s an obvious path,” Phil said. “I mean, it leads right to the portal and stops here. So there’s gotta be something at the other end.” Techno nodded, but his eyes were on Ranboo, who was still studying the landscape around them.

Techno had spent a lot of time watching Ranboo recently. Ever since the incident in the village, he’d kept a watchful eye on the kid, hypervigilant of every movement, every word, and every expression Ranboo made. Phil knew how much Techno hated feeling watched. Phil himself felt a dull paranoia permeating every waking moment. He knew Techno felt it a hundred times more.

“And Dream?” Techno asked bluntly. Ranboo turned as if Techno had said his name, and then paused, his ears pricking, listening for that voice only he could hear.

“Still quiet,” he said after a moment. Techno nodded. Phil was relieved to hear it, but at the same time, each time Ranboo assured them that he wasn’t hearing Dream it made Phil feel a slow build of dread in his stomach. Dream’s silent streak was welcomed by all of them, likely by Ranboo the most, but it made him wonder *why*. Why stay away? Why stay silent? After everything he’d put Ranboo through so far, why now?

Phil knew that neither of his companions could give him an answer. It wasn’t as if he could ask Dream. Phil didn’t even know if he’d want to. This whole thing still felt like something out of one of Techno’s books on mythology, something that would have happened far in the

past when gods and magic and myths still roamed the world. It felt like something they shouldn't *have* to deal with.

Of course, it didn't matter what Phil wanted, or what he thought was fair.

Techno adjusted his backpack and cleared his throat. When Phil and Ranboo turned to him, he jerked his head in the direction of the path, a silent *let's get going*. Phil nodded. As Techno had said before, no point in delaying the inevitable. What exactly "the inevitable" *was*, Phil didn't know, but he supposed they'd find out no matter what.

They walked silently.

It made Phil feel restless. He wanted to fill the silence. He wanted to throw a jab at Techno for still shivering, or to spread his wings and enjoy the sun, or to stop and admire the patches of blue and white flowers along their way, flowers they never had in the tundra, flowers he hadn't seen in ages.

It felt wrong. The simple pleasures made him guilty now. Where Techno had now become determined and fiercely protective, Phil felt unsure, out of his depth. He wanted to feel certain again, certain of what came next. Maybe he'd fallen too far into a routine. Maybe he'd gotten too comfortable.

The cobblestone path wound through the woods. In spots, it was completely overgrown. In other places, tree roots had spread and pushed the stones up out of the earth. As they wandered down the trail in silent anticipation, they began to see more signs of life. There were fences with toppled posts and overgrown grass at their bases. Phil saw the remnants of footpaths through the trees leading off from the trail, the woods slowly reclaiming the trampled grass. They came across a lean-to shed that contained some firewood, already chopped, a coal furnace, and a rusted axe. One side was draped in creeping vines.

Thinking about it, Phil considered the only feasible endpoint to this path to be some kind of village, maybe a homestead, so he wasn't surprised when they began to see the tops of roofs and cobblestone walls at the edge of the treeline. His stomach twisted in anticipation, mind racing wondering what they'd find, if it would be bustling with people, people who would recognize Ranboo, or people who would have no idea who he was, or perhaps worse, people who were afraid of him. Or if it would be empty, left to rot like so many villages were these

days, abandoned, their inhabitants packing up and moving somewhere where the resources were more plentiful.

A few moments later, though, Phil spotted the familiar figure of an iron golem lumbering slowly through the trees ahead of them. He saw Ranboo tense a bit, rubbing one hand over his chestplate where there was still a slight indent from where the golem in the east village had hit him.

“A golem means people,” Phil commented. “Or it means there were people recently, at least.” Ranboo cast a look back at him and nodded, but his face still remained slightly wary. The golem looked old and worn, weathered from years of service. “It’s rusty,” Phil said. He could see the dark reddish brown that accumulated over its body even from a distance. Even the one at the east village hadn’t started rusting like that, and it had been there far longer than Techno had been visiting.

As they got closer, Techno’s pace faltered. He slowed, tilting his chin up slightly at the sight of the golem, confusion spreading over his features, and then eventually, clarity.

“Phil, that... it’s not rust,” Techno said.

“What?” Phil asked, but he could already see that Techno was right. The patches of dark coloration on the golem’s body weren’t dense or spotted like rust, and they weren’t the right shade of orange. “Oh, God,” Phil muttered. It was blood. The golem was covered in blood.

Phil could see it more clearly as they walked closer. The golem stood at the edge of the trees, its clubbed arms and body splattered with dried blood, flaking off but still very much coating its limbs. As they came upon it, the three of them all slowed. The golem looked at them, its eyes grey and cold, arms swaying just barely at its sides. Its shoulders seemed hunched, its head low. It didn’t move as it watched them pass, just observed silently. As Ranboo passed by, it turned its head just slightly to watch him go, but the movement was barely noticeable.

Phil felt dread begin to pool in his stomach, anticipation turned sour. Some part of him still held out hope, but it was crushed as soon as they got to the border of the village.

Techno stopped dead in his tracks, looking down at the body at the entrance to the village. It was little more than a skeleton dressed in rags, laid out on its stomach face-down. One arm was stretched out in front of it, reaching out, palm up.

Ranboo continued to walk, though, past the body in front of them and through the open gates of the village. Phil watched him as he walked numbly to the center of the main square and stood, looking around him with a cold, dazed stare.

It was a massacre. That was the only thing Phil could think to describe it as. Bodies littered the streets. Some were laying on the pathways, some halfway into their homes, some draped over each other. Phil saw one thrown through a wall, the wood splintered around it, rotting at the edges.

There were children. He saw small bodies, bodies too little to be adults, one clutched in another's embrace. He felt sick. They were hardly people anymore, left to rot and be picked at by animals and birds and washed away by who knows how many rains. Most were just bones.

The sight made him dizzy. He found himself thinking about the east village, the people he knew there, looking like this. He imagined the buildings worn away and uncared for, the people discarded, the children dying in fear. He thought of Ilya. He thought of Wilbur.

Phil let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and pushed down the gag that rose in his throat.

Techno was stoic. His face hardly held an expression, the slightest sour passing over his features, but he held himself as though hardly anything had changed around him, one hand resting on his axe. Phil turned to Ranboo and found him shockingly the same.

Of the three of them, he would have expected Ranboo to react the worst. The way he'd shut down after his incident in the east village was dramatically different in comparison to this. And this... this was a thousand times worse. But Ranboo was motionless, his feet rooted to the ground and staring blankly at the destruction around him. He blinked, looking from body to body, skeleton to skeleton, watching them as though he was waiting for them to rise up.

“They died fighting,” Techno said, and the sound of his voice breaking the silence startled Phil. Ranboo remained quiet. “Fighting each other, I think,” Techno added. Phil looked over at him, then back at the remains of the villagers.

“How do you know?” Phil asked. Techno paced forward, glancing around.

“Look at how they’re laying,” Techno said. “On top of each other, or near each other. It’s how you’d find bodies after a battle,” he continued. “But they’re all from here, there’s no pillagers. Their clothes all match. They weren’t attacked.”

He was right; there was no sign of an outside aggressor, no pillagers or mobs, no sigils or banners.

“Why?” Phil asked. It was a question with no answer, not yet. He didn’t expect one, not from Techno at least. And while he hoped more than anything that Ranboo didn’t know the answer either, he still waited, wondering if the kid would say something, if he would remember something.

Ranboo remained silent though. Eventually, Techno walked over to him, placing his hand briefly against Ranboo’s arm. Ranboo looked up at him, but his expression was distant.

“You alright?” Techno asked.

“I don’t...” Ranboo began, but he didn’t finish the sentence. He glanced around again. “I don’t remember this,” he said, but something in his voice betrayed him. It was a half truth. Phil could tell, but he couldn’t quite put words to how he knew.

“You sure?” Techno asked, and Ranboo blinked at him.

“The village... I remember the village. Or I don’t... it’s familiar. It’s—” Ranboo shook his head. “I didn’t...” Ranboo rubbed his hand against his brow, trying to find the words as his confusion grew. “Do you think— do you think this was me?”

“No,” Techno said without hesitation. Ranboo stared at him, his uncertainty cut short by Techno’s confidence in his answer. Ranboo opened his mouth, but then closed it before he said anything more. “We need to look around,” Techno continued. “Stick close to me or Phil, okay?”

“Okay,” Ranboo said quietly. Techno gave him a solemn nod.

The village seemed as though it was preserved, a time capsule, a moment caught forever but soured with age. There were still meals resting on plates on dining room tables, chairs slid back or toppled over, doors that hung open just slightly. There was iron left in a furnace, food long since spoiled in baskets, farms that had been overgrown with weeds and grass and wildflowers. Cobwebs hung from lanterns. Glass lay broken on the ground.

Each home they entered was the same as the last, abandoned. When they were lucky, the occupants weren’t left inside. When they were unlucky, they found corpses slumped over couches or leaned against walls.

Some held weapons.

Some held children.

Some still laid in their beds with sheets covering their bones.

Phil exited one home, the tenth or fifteenth or twentieth, he had lost count, and sat on the stoop. He needed to look away, just for a moment. He needed to stop seeing them. Just for a moment. He couldn’t stand it. He kept seeing Maria, Rose, Ilya. Wilbur. He ached to see Wil now, to know he was safe.

To know this hadn’t become his fate, too. There was something evil here.

“Phil?” he heard Techno call, he and Ranboo exiting a house across the path. Phil looked up to find Techno watching him, his eyes inquisitive and cautious; *are you okay?* Phil nodded, a silent answer to a silent question. Techno held a few papers in his hands.

“What’s that?” Phil asked, pushing himself to his feet. Techno held them out to him.

“It’s a kid’s drawings,” Techno said.

The first paper held a faded sketch of a landscape, a few small houses on hills in the background. In the center there were four figures, three dark and all black, penciled in heavily, and the fourth unmistakably familiar, half black and half white. Phil flipped the paper over. Names were scribbled on the back in messy handwriting, *Edward, Eve, Ranboo, Saesha*.

The next few papers were similar, depictions of what were clearly enderman. They were drawn next to people and children, interacting with each other, holding grass blocks and flowers. Then there were two more of Ranboo. In one, he was holding a stack of books with nonsense scribbles for titles. In another, he stood next to another person, a man much shorter than him dressed in purple and blue.

If Ranboo was in these drawings, it meant they’d found what they were looking for. They’d found the end of the path, and the end point was death. It was answerless, just like everything else. Phil wanted just once for them to come across something *good* at the end of such a journey, but it added up. Dream was an embodiment of chaos itself. It made sense they’d find something so gruesome. Phil didn’t know what else he could have expected.

Phil examined the drawings closely before looking back up at Techno and Ranboo. Ranboo had a distant look in his eyes, still glancing around him at the ruined village.

“I guess...” Phil paused, looking back down at the drawings before handing them back to Techno. “I guess that means we’re in the right place, then?” To his surprise, Techno shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” Techno said. Phil raised an eyebrow, and Ranboo turned his focus to Techno as well. Techno thought for a moment before explaining. “There are endermen in those drawings. Not just Ranboo, *other* endermen, so... where are they?”

“Well...” Phil began, but hesitated with a cautious glance toward Ranboo. “Dead?” Phil said eventually. Ranboo furrowed his brow.

“Where are their bodies? Or their remains?” Techno asked. Phil looked around. “And if they were being attacked, wouldn’t they fight back? None of these villagers have wounds that would have come from an enderman, at least as far as I can tell.”

“Good point,” Phil mumbled. He didn’t let his focus linger on the bodies for too long. He couldn’t keep staring at them. “So what, then? We’re still missing something?” Techno looked back down at the papers in his hands. Phil felt the same dull frustration ache in his chest that he had carried for days now; they were *always* missing something.

Phil couldn’t bring himself to complain about it. He knew they all felt it, Ranboo almost certainly more so than Phil or Techno. And Phil knew if he mentioned it, feeling so close but with their answers just out of reach, it would only make Ranboo’s shadow of guilt grow darker.

“I think I know where we need to go,” Ranboo said softly. Phil almost didn’t process what he’d said at first, only turning to Ranboo after a moment of consideration. Ranboo wasn’t looking at him or Techno, but rather still looking around the village. “This isn’t home. I know it’s not. I’ve been here, but it’s not—” Ranboo cut off abruptly.

Phil followed his line of sight to the edge of the village, a fence gate at the border that exited into a new glade of trees slightly more dense than the wood they’d walked through to get here. Before Phil had a chance to ask if he had remembered something, Ranboo began walking. Techno cast a glance at Phil before following, and Phil practically tripped over his feet trying to catch up.

“Ran— *Ranboo*,” Phil said, “Hold on a sec.” Ranboo continued walking with such purpose that Phil almost felt bad trying to cut him off, but the coldness in his eyes was too concerning for Phil to just let him continue. “Ranboo, stop,” Phil said, placing a hand gently on the boy’s arm. Ranboo slowed to a stop, blinking rapidly for a moment before turning to Phil.

His face was calm, collected, almost stoic. His eyes weren't distant as Phil feared they might be, but they didn't sparkle like Phil was used to. He supposed he hadn't seen that sparkle in a while, though. Since the east village, perhaps. Since they started this journey.

"Do you feel alright?" Phil asked cautiously. A sour look crossed over Ranboo's face.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "I know— I know what you're thinking, and I'm fine." He looked back to the village gate. "I just know there's something this way, and I... I can't let it slip away." He spoke with certainty and determination. Phil glanced to the gate, then back to Ranboo before letting go of his arm.

"Okay," Phil murmured. "Just... it's been a while since we really, you know. *Heard* from Dream."

"That's a good thing, though, isn't it?" Ranboo asked as he began walking again, Phil and Techno close behind him.

"In theory," Techno said. Ranboo furrowed his brow, but he continued to walk, picking their path with confidence. He led them through the forest, making his way around spruce and oak trees, barely even hesitating for a moment to second guess or check his memory. He walked as though he had travelled the same route a hundred times. Phil supposed, though, he easily could have. Rather, he probably *had*.

Ranboo walked with silent determination. Phil wasn't oblivious to the looks of skepticism that Techno was throwing his way as they went; the two of them had fallen into a sort of unspoken agreement to hope for the best and expect the worst. But eventually, they arrived at an outcropping of rock, stretching up above them as the landscape began to change. Ranboo stopped, staring at the blank stone wall.

"Which way?" Techno said after a long quiet. Ranboo continued to stare at the stone.

“It’s... here,” Ranboo said. Phil leaned forward to examine the rock. It was... well. It was a rock.

“This is a rock,” Techno said.

“I *know* it’s a rock,” Ranboo said, exasperated. “There’s something else here.” Ranboo put a hand against the stone as though he were pushing open a door, but nothing happened. He brushed aside moss and lichen, making his way to the right side of the outcropping. Techno cast Phil a look. Phil raised his eyebrows at him before reaching out to poke at the rock as well. Ranboo continued pressing his hands against the cold stone.

It remained, as before, a rock.

“Ranboo, I don’t think—” Techno began, but Ranboo had brushed his hand over a patch of moss that fell away to reveal a rune Phil thought he recognized.

Not a moment later, the facade of the stone shifted. What was once flat stone changed to thick carved bricks, stacked against each other in offset rows. There was an opening, bordered by small carved slabs around the archway. Beyond the entrance, there were stairs that led down. The three of them blinked at the new doorway, equally shocked.

“Nevermind,” Techno eventually muttered. “I’ll never doubt you again. Your wisdom knows no bounds.” Techno patted Ranboo on the shoulder, and Ranboo huffed a laugh. “Only one way left to go,” Techno said. He pulled a torch from his pack, lighting the end with flint.

Techno entered the archway, his torch casting flickering light down the staircase. Ranboo glanced at Phil, and Phil nodded him on. They descended the stairs.

Phil half expected to find another massacre. He prepared himself for the sight, but was met with something far more mild. The staircase wound around in a spiral, down into the earth for a time, before opening up into a small room that was clearly once well lived in. There were blue lanterns hanging from the ceiling that remained lit, ever fueled by the soul soil used to make them. The stone floors were dotted with long, deep red carpets. There were chests and shelves along the walls, a dark oak table and a few chairs, a low bench near the exit of the

stairs that had an old cloak, a canvas bag, and a pair of boots underneath it. The toe of one boot had blood on it. Phil kept this to himself.

It was clear no one had lived there in a while; dust coated every surface, things left out of place remained where they had been discarded, the carpet eaten away at the corners by silverfish and dust mites. Techno leaned over to open a chest, the hinges creaking loudly as he did. He grunted as dust puffed up into his face, waving the cloud away with one hand. He glanced inside, but evidently found the contents not worth noting as he turned back to Ranboo.

“Look familiar?” Techno asked. Phil was sure Ranboo was growing tired of that question, but regardless, Ranboo nodded. He didn’t elaborate, and Techno didn’t ask him to. Ranboo wordlessly walked around the room until he came to the back wall where there were two hallways branching off of either corner of the entryway. He began walking to the left, and Phil and Techno both lurched to follow him before he was out of sight.

The hallway was narrow and dimly lit by more soul lanterns, the ceiling so high that Ranboo didn’t need to duck in the slightest. It turned sharply to the right after a few feet and then continued, uninterrupted, until it let out into another room, this one much larger than the first. The entirety of the back wall was bookshelves, tall and packed with old leather bound tomes and papers. The wood of the shelves was bowed slightly under the weight. In front of the bookshelves, there was a dark black slab of obsidian, tipped at the corners with cracked diamonds. One side of it was chipped off, and it had books piled around it on the ground.

More chests and storage lined the other walls, crafting benches and workstations and half finished projects. It reminded Phil of their own homestead, of his own basement in how everything always seemed to pile up.

Ranboo walked to the center of the room and stood, looking down, at another body.

It lay slumped against the step that led up to the library where it was slightly raised, dressed in faded purple and blue clothes. It, too, was little more than a skeleton, the flesh eaten away by silverfish. Next to it, there was a gold necklace with a cracked gem in the pendant and a leatherbound notebook.

Ranboo picked up the book. It was identical to the one that Ilya had given back to him in the village, a spiral design etched into the cover, the dark cover rubbed soft at the edges from use. Ranboo stared at it for a moment before passing it off to Techno without opening it or looking inside. Techno took it gently, flipping it open. Phil walked over to look over his shoulder, half expecting to see the same garbled contents of Ranboo's memory books repeated here, but the sight was starkly different.

This notebook held neatly written passages, divided by dates and times and seasons, organized meticulously. As Techno skimmed through the pages, stopping only for a moment at a time to examine a date or a drawing, it was clear this was far more of a diary than a memory book, as Ranboo had used his notebooks for. There were several blank pages left at the end. It seemed this was the last notebook this person had written before they died.

Techno closed it, turning it over to look at the back cover, where he found the number "17" carved into the leather in delicate script. Underneath that, there was a line of text:

Property of Karl Jacobs

"Karl Jacobs," Phil read aloud. "Ring a bell?" He asked, looking up at Ranboo. Ranboo narrowed his eyes at the book, then at the body.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe? It sounds... like I've heard it before, I guess." Phil let out a sigh, nodding. He knew better than to hope that there would be some magical flood of memories that would come back to Ranboo now, but... it would be nice, wouldn't it?

"There'll be more of these," Techno said. "This is number seventeen. And I'm willing to bet that this," he nodded down at the body before them, "was Karl." Phil looked over to gauge Ranboo's reaction, but Ranboo had already moved to explore more of the room. He peered at the titles on the spines of the books, leaned over the broken obsidian table, and paused when he came to a shelf in the far corner of the room.

"Pearls," he said simply, and reached out to pick up something off of the shelf. He stared down at it in his hands. As Phil walked closer, he saw that Ranboo was right; it was a fragment of an enderpearl, dark green and glassy. It was small, clearly from a pearl far smaller than the fragment Phil had in his own home. Ranboo held it out to Phil, and Phil took it, turning the thin shard over in his palm. Ranboo picked up another from the shelf. There

were more, a small pile of them in a glass dish there. The shards tinkled against each other as Ranboo ran his fingers over them. “That means... that means there were Endermen here, right?” Ranboo asked.

“Yeah,” Phil answered. *It means they died*, he thought to himself. From the look on Ranboo’s face, the kid had thought the same thing.

Phil’s eyes traveled lower, to the shelf just below the one that held the pearls.

“These are the other notebooks,” Phil said, kneeling down to get a better look at the bottom shelf. There was a stack of them there, the other sixteen, each almost identical to the one they had already found. They all had slight flaws, all handmade, places where the leather wasn’t stretched right or where the spiral was carved too deep or the threads had come loose.

He grabbed an armful of them. Ranboo put down the pearl shards and did the same, carrying them back over to the larger table near the center of the room as Techno laid the torch down on the cold stone floor and stamped out the flame with his heel. The soul lanterns provided light enough.

“We’ve got some reading to do then, it looks like,” Techno said. He pulled his backpack from his shoulders and set it against the leg of the table, pulling out a chair to sit in before rooting around in the pack. “Ranboo, why don’t you look through those bookshelves and pull out anything you think might be helpful?” Ranboo nodded. Techno pulled his glasses out of a hard leather case. “I can get started on reading through these.”

“I’ll set us up to stay here for the night, then,” Phil said. Techno hummed and sifted through the books until he found the first of the series. “Read out anything important you find, yeah?” Phil asked, and Techno nodded as he opened the cover. He cleared his throat.

“Entry, 63rd Day of Spring of the 31st Year,” Techno began to read.

“It is with great joy that I mark the discovery of a new stronghold, a safehaven capable of housing this Haunting, free from watching eyes, and for the preservation of my late Father’s

life work. Given that these books, and these creatures, are what little remains of him, I see it as my purpose to continue caring for them as he did.

And as I am not my Father, and I was not gifted with the inheritance of his memory nor of his organization, the purpose of this text becomes twofold; a memory to he who writes it, and a history to he who reads it – on the preservation of the Enderman race and of the knowledge of the last Enchanter.”

Chapter End Notes

ehehehehe "karl jacobs has entered the chat"

I know this chapter doesn't hold a ton of those juicy answers you all want, but i promise, the next chapter is gonna hold the key to all these locked doors i've put in front of you, i swear. hope i haven't left you on the edge of your seats for too long... stay with me now... :')

Also, shoutout to DistillanceFlake who commented like 5 chapters ago, they totally called it that Karl was gonna be in this. Bravo lmao.

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go! Thanks for reading!

7/22 - i really hope yall like this next chapter cus im trying something new and its been super fun to write so far... my goal is to update by or on this saturday! no promises... but fingers crossed...

7/23 – last minute plans popped up for tomorrow, probably more likely it will come out sunday!

7/25 – new chap is on track to be posted tonight around 9pm est :0

To Ashes

Chapter Summary

I dare not rejoice yet, only document what has occurred with the hope that the miracle may last.

A hybrid has spawned to the Haunting. Even writing it now, it feels like a dream. He came into the world in much the same way as the Endlings have in the past, frail and ill and already draining of life. I tried, as I try each time an Endling spawns, to heal him as he weakened. I was hardly aware of his difference to the other Endlings. I only knew he was dying, and how desperately I wanted to save him, as I have so desperately wanted to save each of them.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: brief and non-graphic mention of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Entry, 65 of Spring, 31st Year

Of the many difficulties of moving with a Haunting of Endermen, sentimentality was not a challenge I expected. All they want to bring is blocks of dirt and clumps of flowers from my Father's home, and while I want nothing more than to encourage them to bring whatever they wish to make the new stronghold feel more comfortable, I'm not fond of the idea of piling the new library high with soil and worms. I'm not a neat person, but indoor gardening is where I draw the line.

I doubt it will be easy to convince them to leave this grass behind.

But in all fairness, they are not thrilled with the idea of moving. Endermen are creatures of habit, but this place can no longer sustain us. I knew it would come to pass that with the death of my Father, the land he protected and breathed life into so long ago would crumble

when he was gone. He was all that remained of the old kingdom, and his magic kept it alive. I know they understand this, but it is a sorrowful move nonetheless.

Still, to Endermen, home is not so much a place as it is a community. They will find peace wherever they maintain their Haunting. I am hopeful they will thrive.



Entry, 89 of Spring, 31st Year

The village in the oakwood has, unexpectedly, taken a keen interest in the Endermen. I have no doubt it is in large part due to the absolute reckless abandon of children who insist upon venturing as close to the Haunting as they possibly can. One of them continues to give them flowers; Edward has returned numerous times holding a clump of poppies. He plants them around the stronghold.

I will admit, they liven up the place. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I'd like to go to the oakwood eventually to see what they have to trade, so encouraging a healthy relationship between the villagers and their new neighbors couldn't hurt.

The Haunting is enjoying the company as well. My Father often kept them secluded, though he had reason to fear. When I was very young, I remember him mourning the loss of an Enderman, Ember, to a villager who thought the creature was hostile. It was a misunderstanding, but my Father never forgave. The Haunting was everything to him. He loved them as his own kin.

He used to tell me how the Endermen held the pulse of the universe in their souls. He believed they were the last link to the power of the Totem God, to the energy that gave humans the ability to harness that life force to enchant. After the God War, he said, the Endermen and the Enchanters were bonded forever by the pain of being cut off from the End and from the Totem God. They knew of each other's grief in a way no other being could, and that made them family. It made them our purpose, now. I love them as he did, with all my heart.



Entry, 43 of Summer, 32nd Year

My hopes that the Endermen would have more fortune spawning in this new location have been dashed. Admittedly, it was a naive thought. Conditions have little to do with it. The Endlings that spawn simply have no ability to draw life force from the End.

It is agony to watch them come into the world only to be drained of life so quickly. As they draw their last breaths, their pearls shatter. They leave them behind in the ash of their death. The Endermen mourn over their pale white bodies, drained of the midnight black of the Void, and I mourn with them. They cannot be healed, nor can they be helped.

Each death leaves a bitter emptiness. I fear, as my Father did, that they will never be able to spawn again. The End is too far gone from them. It is cruel that this world continues to try.



Entry, 78 of Summer, 32nd Year

The children in the oakwood like to believe they are speaking the language of the Void when they chirp back to the Endermen. Saesha sat with the butcher's daughter, Melody, warbling back and forth with her for nearly an hour trying to teach the girl how to say her name properly in Voidspeak. She will not be able to, of course. Only the Endermen can utter those syllables properly. But it warms the heart to see them try.



Entry, 16 of Winter, 32nd Year

I fear we have lost Emory for good. My heart yearns to believe he is alive, but he has been gone for nearly a month now, and he was the oldest of the Haunting.

Endermen venture away from home to die. They do not wish to burden the Haunting with their passing. It is in times like these I wish the Endermen were more like humans. I would have liked to say goodbye.



Entry, 7 of Spring, 32nd Year

I dare not rejoice yet, only document what has occurred with the hope that the miracle may last.

A hybrid has spawned to the Haunting. Even writing it now, it feels like a dream. He came into the world in much the same way as the Endlings have in the past, frail and ill and already draining of life. I tried, as I try each time an Endling spawns, to heal him as he weakened. I was hardly aware of his difference to the other Endlings. I only knew he was dying, and how desperately I wanted to save him, as I have so desperately wanted to save each of them.

But as time went on, the paling of his little body slowed, and by some miracle the darkness of the Void lingered on his left half. He is weak and frail and even now, his breathing rattles in his chest. I dare not claim he will make it in this world, but never has a new spawn lasted so long.

The Endermen hover around him. I think they are waiting for his first cry. They have not yet named him. I think they dare not trust to hope. The night will be long, but I will do everything in my power and knowledge to keep him in this world.



Entry, 8 of Spring, 32nd Year

He has survived the night. I did not sleep a wink. At every opportunity I could take, I fed him potions of healing and strength, and though he has not yet stirred, his breathing has evened and the color has ceased to drain from his body. I wonder, if he lives, if it will ever return.



Entry, 10 of Spring, 32nd Year

The Endermen have not ventured far from the child's side.

I had feared given his strange appearance they would grow to shun him, as hybrids often are, but they love him as one of their own even when they are unsure of his fate. The fact that he's made it this long makes them restlessly hopeful. They sing to him at night and stay by his side, watch him with wide eyes, and each time he stirs I can feel them urging him to open his eyes and see the world for the first time.

He sleeps, and he grows stronger. His bond to the End is broken, as it is for all Endermen, but his bond to this world remains strong. I believe this is what has saved him from the same fate as the other Endlings. How odd that the very thing that makes him different from the Endermen is what has saved him and allowed him a tie to this world.

I dare say I believe he will make it.



Entry, 17 of Spring, 32nd Year

I have never felt such love or joy as when Ranboo opened his eyes, wide and clear and sparkling and swirling with life and awe. He reached out and gripped my finger with his little hand and uttered his first trill, and the Endermen sang their rejoice so loudly I wonder if they heard it in the oakwood.

The Haunting has named him Ranboo.

I wish my Father could have lived to meet him.



Entry, 54 of Fall, 33rd Year

I did not know for a long while if Ranboo's pearl remained intact or if it shattered as the other Enderlings' pearls have, but I believe I have my answer now. While he was out in the birch forest, exploring while I tended to the mushroom grove, it began to rain unexpectedly, and when it did, strange purple lights began to dance around the child. I recognized this from my Father's stories of Endermen before the God War, how their pearls allowed them to teleport by passing through the Void.

I am ashamed to say I panicked. I did not know what else to do. The Void contains great evil now, and I could not risk Ranboo to pass through that place. I have placed the curse of Binding on him, holding his soul to this realm for as long as I live. Whether or not this choice was right, I do not know. I cannot undo it now. The rain may pain him, but it is far less pain than he would suffer passing through the Void with all the chaos it now holds.

At least the curse did not seem to hurt him. He grew frustrated, but settled once he was ushered under a tree by Eve and Noctia. He went back to plucking grass from the ground and chirruping at the insects in the dirt, blissfully unaware of his near demise.



Entry, 19 of Winter, 35th Year

The language of the Enchanters is already coming easily to Ranboo. He learns quickly, always hungering for more knowledge, more to read, more stories to learn. Speaking in the common tongue remains a challenge, but I think his desire to communicate with the villagers in the oakwood will drive him to practice the sounds and intonation despite its unfamiliarity. The children there speak to him, and when he warbles back to them, they laugh at the sound in delight. He has learned how to say their names, Melody and Lowell and Percy. And unlike the adults, the children do not hesitate to correct him when his pronunciation slips. Though I'm sure Ranboo would prefer it if they didn't tease him about it.



Entry, 3 of Summer, 39th Year

How my own Father managed to raise a child is beyond me. I respect him all the more for it now. I love this boy dearly, but he will be the death of me, I know it. How can one child wander off so much?

I don't think he understands the fear it makes me feel when he goes off on his own. I have to remind myself that the Enderman blood that runs in his veins protects him fiercely— he's got an instinct for danger that rivals even the Haunting, and many a time it has kept him from meeting the sharp end of an arrow, even without his ability to teleport. But it does not protect him from everything.

He came back today with a nasty wound on his arm, deep enough that I almost had to stitch it closed. He says it was from a Zombie that surprised him while he was exploring around a nearby waterfall, the sound of the creature's approach masked by the thunderous water. He found himself cornered.

I know I cannot stop him from wandering; he loves the thrill of adventure too much. So after much thought, I've asked Sapnap to train him in combat, to show him how to wield a sword and protect himself. Both Sapnap and Ranboo were enamoured by the idea, of course. And I will feel much more confident in Ranboo's safety if I know he can defend himself.

I just wish he wouldn't be so recklessly curious in the first place.



Entry, 77 of Fall, 43st Year

There are times when I wonder if Ranboo wishes he had been born a full Enderman, or a full human. He has never said this; I doubt he ever would. He is not one to complain. But I see how he looks at the Haunting when they communicate in ways no outsider could hope to comprehend, when they gather at night and feel the pulse of the void around them.

In the village, he stands out as well, not human, not Enderman. When the wandering traders pass through, they view him as other. Some even fear him. I know he does not blame them for it, but I'm sure it makes him think just a moment too long of his origins, of his miraculous, improbable existence.

I remind him he is a gift. He is shaped by the remaining life force of the Totem God, brought into the world even when we believed there could be no more hope of a new Enderman life. I cannot claim to know his feelings, and he does not often share. I can only assure him he will never be an outsider to us, to his family.



Entry, 81 of Fall, Year 46

Today in the village, I asked after a wandering trader I much wished to exchange goods with – he was one of the few who managed to acquire glowstone powder, and it is much easier to trade for it than to venture into the Nether. I try to avoid that realm as much as I can. But another trader who had arrived the day before informed me that the man I sought had disappeared, that none in their caravan had heard from him for several days now. I hope he remains safe. This world is not a very kind place to disappear into.



Entry, 31 of Winter, Year 46

One of the oldest souls in the oakwood, Ellis, has unfortunately passed away. News of his passing came as a surprise to me. Ellis was fine when last I saw him; an old man, certainly, but aside from the expected ache in his back and cloudiness in his vision, he made his way around just fine. But I ventured there today on a simple trip to replenish our stock of beet seeds, and when I arrived, George told me of his death.

He said Ellis was fine one moment, and the next, he acted as though he'd lost his mind. He spouted nonsense in a panic before his heart gave out from the stress of his fear and delusion. I know the mind is the last to go, but to see it go so suddenly... I did not know Ellis well, but I can imagine it was hard to see. George looked like he had not slept since Ellis' death. I sat and talked with him for a while. He seemed grateful for the company.



Entry, 39 of Winter, Year 46

I fear there is a sickness in the oakwood. Ellis I could attribute to old age; it is an unfortunate truth that he was nearing the end of his days. Ellis' son I assumed was grief, the death of his father too much for him to bear as he, too, succumbed to a disturbed mind. Riddled with sorrow, his wife said. He made less and less sense each time he woke.

But with news of another's passing, I can no longer believe this is a coincidence. She had no despair of the heart, no great illness of the mind, and yet she fell to the same insanity as the others. The villagers are afraid. I do not blame them.

Her daughter now shows the same signs. She wakes to stare off into nothingness and walks here and there with no regard or awareness of her surroundings. Edward returned from his venture out to the village with a letter from Sapnap asking my help. I have known my friend long enough to tell when he is distressed, even in writing. I prepare my supplies tonight and leave at dawn.

I've told the Haunting to stay away from the oakwood until I am sure it is safe. I cannot risk their wellbeing. It is my duty to keep them out of harm's way.



Entry, 41 of Winter, Year 46

I could not save her.

In the end, she was too weak. She would not eat or drink, would not sleep. I should have done more, or come more prepared. I underestimated this illness. I only find comfort that her mother was not around to see her suffer so.

But despite how horrible her death was, it is not the event that scares me now, but what came after. When she died, I felt something I cannot describe. A chill, a darkness. And in the instant I felt it, one of the gems cracked from my Father's circlet, the crown he gifted me enchanted with Protection.

The circlet is one I never saw him without in all my youth until the day he taught me how to enchant. Then, he passed it onto me, imbued with holy guards from a time when the God's life force flowed strong in this land. Very few artifacts remain with such enchantments. My Father told me his trident holds an equally powerful force, but I have never known what ability it holds. But as for the crown, it is a defense against evil, evil that was wiped from this earth long ago. Or so I thought. Though my Father maintained a strong caution for the remains of chaos left over from the God War, I never saw such things threaten us. Not until now.

The power of this enchantment is impossible now to replicate, the strength rivaled by none. For it to be damaged... I fear there is something truly wicked among us. I dare not guess what.

The sickness has not shown itself in anyone else as of yet. I have returned to the stronghold to prepare potions of strength and regeneration, as it is clear that healing was not enough.

Whatever this sickness is, if I can cure it before it takes its next victim, I have to believe it must die out. As of yet, it transfers from one person to the next, though I do not claim to understand it fully.

I must turn to my Father's research on such illnesses of the mind. Perhaps he has left me something I can use.

I have not yet told Ranboo of Jude's death. I cannot bear to see him cry. I know I must eventually, but for now, I spare him for my own selfishness.



Entry, 45 of Winter, Year 46

Where to begin?

It is vital the Endermen Haunting stay far away from the oakwood. It is Ranboo in particular I now find myself concerned with.

The sickness has transferred itself once again, and once again, it only affects one person as far as I can tell – it's host was a young man who was otherwise entirely healthy and mentally sound. When I returned to the village after gathering supplies, I learned they had to restrain him for his own safety.

The circumstances concern me; they say he awoke the night before and made his way to the graveyard to the south and dug up his father's coffin. Two of the villagers followed him, but did not interrupt him, curious of his intent. When he unearthed the body, he pulled forth the shards of an Enderpearl the man was buried with, an heirloom passed down to him from long before we arrived here. But upon finding it broken, the villagers report he threw the pearl across the graveyard and began clawing at his arms and neck, drawing blood.

That is when they intervened, afraid he was attempting to kill himself. What made him act this way, I still do not know. But it is clear he was searching for the pearl. That, I can't deny, as much as I would like to. But the question then was why? The pearl is considered a precious gem, far rarer than diamond or lapis, often passed down through generations. But why discard it after finding it?

I gave him potions of regeneration and healing upon my return, but he continued to struggle against his bonds and seemed to be responding to a voice none of us heard. When I gave him strength, though, it seemed at first to cure him (though I now realize I was naive in believing so). He returned to his normal self, thanking us for our help, telling us the voice was gone. He seemed to be fine.

I returned to the village for two days after to observe him, making sure his condition was getting better. He seemed to be stable. But on the third day, he regressed suddenly and with no warning. I hate to even record the truth of what happened. He attacked another villager, Mabel, and the village's iron golem went after him for the act. It killed him. They could not stop it. Mabel died shortly after of her injuries.

They looked to me for help, and I failed them. I fear I will never wash away their blood from my hands.

When he died, another gem from my Father's circlet shattered. There is evil among us. I should have seen it sooner.



Entry, 46 of Winter, Year 46

It calls itself Dream. It claims it is a Dreamon, and I am inclined to believe it despite the dread it fills me with. That I thought this was a mere sickness will be my greatest regret. There is no mortal cure for this being of chaos.

It has taken George. The emptiness in his eyes haunts me.

Through him, Dream has spoken. It took his voice and used it for its own. It believes these people are little more than vessels for its task, lives with no purpose. It is a hateful creature. It has revealed its intent;

“I will wipe out this entire village,” it said to me, “until you let me into your mind, until your Godly protection shatters.”

I asked it, “why?”

It told me, “you have information I need, what none of these fools here can tell me.” It is searching for a pearl, it said. It is only a thought now, only a whisper, it can only do so much. It was not given strength enough to pull its physical body through into the Overworld from the Void, only enough that it could take root but not enough to grow tall. It searches for the Haunting, but it cannot find them. I have them too well hidden. None in the village know of the stronghold, nor do they know how to enter it.

“They are shattered,” I told it. “All of them. The pearls were shattered when the End was sealed off from this world.”

“You lie,” it told me. “These fools know of Endermen. They know of a Haunting, but they do not know where it resides. But you know.”

“I do. But their pearls are shattered. They serve no use to you. Spare them. Spare this place,” I begged it. I begged. I begged because I could not think of what else to do. The potion of strength only banished it for a time, not for an eternity. It offered clarity amid a storm, nothing more. I begged because I could not risk the truth unfolding.

“You lie,” it told me.

It grinned through George, a sickening grin that twisted his soft features into harsh lines and haunting eyes. I could hardly bear to look at him. It pains me to imagine what he was thinking, if he could see through his eyes watching this unfold, if he could feel.

“These fools know of a hybrid,” it said. “A child. New life.”

The Dreamon knows all of the knowledge of its vessel. This I have learned. It has used vessels, human lives, to travel and to learn and to seek out this knowledge, knowledge of the pearl. The pearl is what allows the Endermen to teleport; and when they do, they pass in and out of the Void. If an Enderman were to teleport now, without the protection of the Totem God overseeing it...

This is what Dream wants. To latch onto anything it can that would drag its body from the void. And once it is free, it seeks to free the Dreamons that remain. It seeks to return chaos to the world, a world now abandoned, now left to its own devices. It seeks to use the pearl for this.

It has given me a choice.

If I allow it access to my mind, to all my knowledge, and therefore to the location of the stronghold and the Haunting, and of Ranboo, it will spare the village. It will spare George. It will leave his mind intact, transfer to mine, and claim me as a vessel. It will use me to find the stronghold. It will use me so it can use him.

But if I do not, if I fight it, if I delay, it will kill every last soul in the village to get past the enchantment on the circlet of Protection. It will kill them one by one, each time chipping away at this enchantment until it finally breaks, until it finally takes me over in the end.

“It is the inevitable,” it said. “You will break. You will be your own downfall.”

How did it come to this? How? I pray, but the Totem God does not listen, I know this. I know this, but I pray anyway.

My options are limited, and none are good. If I remain hidden, if I return to the stronghold and stay there, Dream will massacre the village. Their blood will be on my hands. Not only

that, but I cannot remain hidden forever, nor can the Haunting, nor can Ranboo. We will run out of food, out of supplies. We will starve. We will die slowly.

If I allow Dream to take over my mind, I spare the village, but Dream then gains knowledge of the stronghold. It would have me lead him straight to Ranboo.

And even if I sent Ranboo away, it seems now the only thing keeping the boy safe is the stronghold's ward of invisibility. He would inevitably be found, be hunted, be harvested. The thought chills me to my core. I shake even as I write this.

How did it come to this?

There must be a way. There must be.

Dream has given me until sundown tomorrow to decide the fate of this world. I long for salvation. I long for my Father's wisdom, for him to tell me what to do. What would he have done? Would he have allowed it to get this far? Would he have found a way? Would he have some knowledge?

I must turn to his research, to his library. There must be a way. I cannot condemn a child to death. I cannot allow this to pass.

I cannot bear to see my child tortured and used. I cannot even bear the thought.

There must be a way.



It is too late.

Even with the answer at my fingertips, it is too late.

I am in agony. I cannot withstand the weight of this.

He left a map, but it is too late. If I open it now, if I learn of the Totem's location, it will be knowledge that Dream will use against us. If I view the map, it will know, and it will seek out the Evokers treasure, and it will destroy them until there is nothing left that can stop it. It is too late. It is too late.

The only result is death. Painful death.

The only mercy I see now... I can hardly bring myself to say it. The only mercy I see now is to kill Ranboo myself, to offer him a quick death, a peaceful death. One that would come to him as easily as sleep. I could destroy the pearl. I could offer myself to Dream and perhaps, when he learns of what I've done, he will leave this world, knowing he no longer has any hope.

If I were brave, I would do it. If I were my Father, if I weren't a coward, if I weren't so selfish, so pitiful, so soft, I would do it. But I love him too much.

He is asleep now. He dreams. He makes little chirps and warbles and sighs, and I cannot bear to look on him with even a hint of harmful intent. I am a coward. I am selfish.



I led him into the woods, to the portal. I gave him my Father's circlet. It will not last much longer if Dream finds him again. I can only hope that I am hiding him well enough to spare him that fate. I can only hope. I can only hope.

I have cast Vanishing on his mind. He still did not know my intent, did not know the cruelty this world was putting me through. Putting us through. I did not tell him. I am selfish, and I

did not tell him. He looked upon me before I cast it. I know I looked a wreck. I know he was concerned. He saw the tears welling in my eyes, the tiredness, the fear. He told me everything would be okay.

This world does not deserve him. I do not deserve him.

I could not bear to look as his eyes glazed over, as his vibrant mind dulled into confusion. I instructed him to run, to run far, to stay hidden. I gave him a notebook and instructed him to write, to write anything and everything, and to keep safe. I sent him through the portal.

I failed him.



I have sent the Haunting away, away to find a new home, a new safety, somewhere far from here. I can now only trust in their uncanny instincts for danger and hope some force in this world still protects them.

I wonder if they understand. I wonder if they blame me, if they hate me for sending away their kin. This is all I can do.

I wonder if my Father would understand. I wonder if he would blame me, too. Perhaps he would be right.



I have failed them all.

The village is sealed with blood. I should not have trusted Dream. I do not know what possessed me to believe it was being truthful. Why did I trust? Why did I believe it would

spare them?

I arrived to see only one man remain, Sapnap, my beloved friend, standing amid the desolation, his body battered and bloody, the sickly grin of the Dreamon on his face. I knew from the moment I saw him what had been done. I knew even before I saw their bodies. It said nothing when it killed him, only let his body drop to the ground in silent death.

It is in my mind now, scraping to be free, scraping at the knowledge I contain. I have made potions of strength. I am keeping it at bay. I feel it growing stronger, though, even now, even as I write. I have cast Power on my Mother's necklace, but I am not as strong an Enchanter as my Father. It will not last. The gem already begins to crack.

I have returned to the stronghold. I have Bound myself here, to this place. I cannot leave. I cannot take Dream with me. I will live as long as I can live. I will give Ranboo time to run, to hide. To escape. God, I pray he may escape. I pray he may never be found. I know my prayers fall on deaf ears, but I pray.



I cannot forget the sight. The golem standing, bloodied, its own people's blood on its hands, the people it was meant to protect. Their blood is on my hands too. The people I was meant to protect. They were not mine, and yet I loved them as family.

I am alone here. I long for the company of the Haunting. I long to know that Ranboo is safe. I long to feel his embrace, to hear his laugh, his melody, to see him sing with his kin.



I am running out of Strength potions.

I am running out of strength.

The gem is nearly cracked.



I have not the will nor the life left in me to cast another enchantment. I have not the ingredients to brew any more Strength. It will not let me sleep. I know not how many days it has been since last I shut my eyes without seeing its horrible grin.

Is this what they saw? Is this what they experienced? Before they died? Did they have any peace?

Will I?



It will not be silenced. It will not be silent. It is clawing behind my eyes, beneath my skin.



It has shown me the darkness of the Void, the chaos that lies within

you cannot hold it at bay

you cannot

you cannot

~~i am beginning to see why they went mad~~



food turns to ashes

*to ash to ash to **ash***

i cannot taste

Cannot breathe

You brought this on yourself

It is broken now, the necklace is broken now,

It is broken now.



*they are banished to the void, banished to darkness, they crawl and cry and seethe with rage
~~and bloodlust and fear~~*

*they are only **chaos** ,*

*it is all they **want***

now

now

All they want

it is all they want all they want all they want is

chaos



I should have killed him. It would have been a mercy.

I am a coward.

I should have spared him this hell.

! ♠ { 0 x x /

Chapter End Notes

sooooooooo... you've got your answers now..... how we feelin....? o.o

I tried something out of my comfort zone with this chapter so I hope you all liked reading it!! I've loved reading all of your theories on Ranboo's past so far, some of you had the right idea too :0 very excited to hear what yall think!! if u've got thoughts, pls feel welcome to leave a comment, i love reading and responding to all ur comments, it makes my whole day :) And if you liked this but dont want to comment, consider leaving a Kudos! <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go! Thanks for reading!

7/25 – same day as posting; we just broke 50k hits :) i cannot believe how much support this fic is getting, this is such a huge milestone for me!! thank u all for ur reads and interactions and for sticking with me so long <333

7/27 – I've got a few important things coming up this week and next week with pretty strict deadlines, so it's probable that the next chapter will take a bit longer to post! I'm aiming to get it out within the 2 week mark, but I'm not setting a strict post date :)

7/29 - I've been doing some planning, and some restructuring of this fic's resolution... you may notice there's now 29 planned chapters instead of 24! Had to pace it a bit better and fix some things, but I think what i have planned now will work much more smoothly. And i know none of you will be particularly upset by 5 more chapters lol.

7/31 – may not have made direct chapter progress, but i DID add summary blurbs to each chapter so. that's something ig. i also finally went back and answered a bunch of old comments so if u got spammed, i'm sorry ily <3

8/3 – holy cow its august. Wild. anyway. I'm making progress on the next chapter! I've

got about 2k words of it so far. it's proving to be a Fun Task to write again after this one lol...

8/7 – ugh, I know I said I'd try to get the next chapter out by today, but I'm moving cities tomorrow. I don't have much left of it to write, but tonight I need to pack. I'm aiming for a monday update, but I'll keep you posted <3

Remnants

Chapter Summary

“There has to be something,” Ranboo muttered. “Otherwise it’s just... hopeless.” He dropped his gaze back down to his hands.

“It’s not hopeless,” Phil said softly. “Karl... Karl was alone in the end. He didn’t have anyone to help him. But you have us.” Ranboo narrowed his eyes slightly. “We’ll keep you safe.” Ranboo was quiet for a long moment, his face stoic.

“I don’t know if you can,” Ranboo said eventually.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The blank pages that remained in diary seventeen were crisp, untouched, only damaged at the corners by slight holes and divots left by endermites searching for food. There was nothing more to read. The entries were finished, leaving half of the book unwritten. Cut short.

Techno flipped through them anyway, hoping for something, but knowing he’d find nothing. They were blank, each and every one of them, unmarred by the ramblings of a man going mad.

Book seventeen had been found beside the body of Karl Jacobs. His last entry must have been written just before he died.

The final thoughts of a dying mad man were that he should have killed the boy he loved like a son. The boy who sat in front of Techno now, cross legged in front of scattered open books, his eyes staring forward at nothing. Techno felt acid in his throat.

He glanced down at the pile of other diaries on the table in front of him. Much of their content had been day to day activities, accounts of farming or supply levels. For a long time after Karl had written of Ranboo’s spawning, Techno had read in silence, not finding anything worth noting or passages worth reading aloud. He hadn’t expected it to turn so suddenly.

Or so tragically.

His mind was still reeling from what he'd read, the way Karl had suffered. He'd lost his family. He'd died alone, not knowing what would become of the child he loved so much. And here Ranboo was now, hearing those final thoughts that Karl likely thought no one would ever read, thoughts he wrote down only for himself. Maybe writing made him feel less alone. Maybe it passed the time. They'd never know.

And aside from the sheer devastation that had been recounted in the diary, there was also a much more grave matter at hand; they had been right. They were dealing with something much larger than them.

Some small corner of Techno's mind had still ventured to hope that perhaps, somehow, this was all just a conjuration of Ranboo's imagination. That the voice Ranboo heard was little more than an affliction of the mind, a simple nightmare, a bizarre paranoia. It was easier to think that maybe there wasn't an enemy at all.

It was a slim hope, but it was hope nonetheless. Now it was gone. What was left was a crushing reality.

Techno wasn't often a catastrophizer, but in the worst case scenario here, it was, truly, the end of the world. The Dreamons had waged war against the Totem God once before, and it had resulted in the decimation of the world as it was. If Dream found a way to travel in and out of the Void, to bring the Dreamons back to the Overworld, it would be a second God War, only this time, without the God to fight back. And then the madness that took Karl would take all of them.

And yet somehow, that thought didn't really matter to Techno. What mattered was what came *before* the end of the world. What mattered was that Dream was after Ranboo. That Dream was capable of so much death, so much pain; a torture he so clearly intended to extend to their kid. A torture Ranboo had already endured for so long now. Dream was heartless, and cruel, and didn't care that Ranboo was just a child, or that he was innocent, or that he was loved.

The final words Techno had read aloud still hung heavy in the air; *I should have killed him. It would have been a mercy. I am a coward. I should have spared him this hell.* Techno had hesitated to even read it out loud, but in the end, he had decided Ranboo deserved to know what it said. Techno let out a breath.

“That’s the last entry,” Techno said. “There’s a line after it, something in Enchanted, but...” Techno didn’t know how to read it. And he certainly wasn’t going to let Ranboo so much as *glance* at this book. And frankly, he didn’t think it mattered what the Enchanted said. The point got across all the same. Ranboo didn’t look up at him, only stared at his hands. Phil looked pale, almost like he was going to be sick. Techno had the same feeling in his own gut as well. He was sure Ranboo felt it tenfold.

“There has to be more,” Ranboo said, disbelief laced in his voice. “There— there must be another diary, that can’t... that can’t be it...”

Techno shared a look with Phil, but they both knew the answer. That was it. There *couldn’t* be more. There was nothing left of Karl but these diaries now, and this, in Techno’s hands, was what was left of his final moments before the Dreamon killed him, drove him to madness, starved him out. A prisoner in his own body.

“I’m sorry,” Techno said. He could think of nothing else to express, nothing to make any of it better. Ranboo shook his head, staring forward at nothing.

“I don’t understand,” Ranboo mumbled, his voice shaking. He sounded like he was barely holding himself together. The clawed nails on his left hand pressed into the skin of his right hard enough to leave marks. “He— there’s— *God* I don’t even know where to *start*, ” Ranboo stammered. “It killed him... it killed *all* of them, and, and he— Karl thought he was giving me a chance to get *away* but Dream just...”

It was like Ranboo was trying to process everything at once, but his thoughts couldn’t keep up. He trailed off, his eyes glazing over, overwhelmed by the sheer density of information they’d uncovered. Phil was frozen in place as well. Even Techno felt rooted to the floor, like if he moved he’d shatter something unspoken.

“At least...” Phil began, but hesitated when he saw Ranboo’s ears twitch back. “At least we know now... what happened. What Dream is capable of.”

“ *You* know now,” Ranboo said. His expression darkened with the correction. “ *I* already knew.”

There was a bitterness to his words that Techno hadn't expected. The words *I understand* were heavy on Techno's tongue, but he held them back. He didn't understand. He couldn't possibly understand.

“I believe you,” Techno said instead.

“Ranboo—” Phil began, but he was cut off.

“Don't ask me if I remember,” Ranboo said coldly. “I don't.” Phil closed his mouth, the question caught in his throat. Ranboo let out a breath slowly and ran his fingers across his temples. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “I can't keep hearing that question.”

“Don't apologize, mate. Must get annoying being asked that all the time,” Phil said with a shrug, his voice gentle and patient. Ranboo shook his head.

“It's just—” Ranboo let his hands fall back into his lap, staring at his open palms. “That man... Karl... he was an *enchanter*. He was powerful, he— he had all of the resources and knowledge he could possibly have, and even *he* couldn't fight dream off.” Ranboo looked up at Techno and Phil for the first time since Techno had finished reading the diary out loud. “What does that mean for me?”

Neither of them could offer an answer, because the answer was painfully obvious; if they didn't find a solution, it meant death. From the sound of it, a far more painful death than the Enchanter faced.

“There has to be *something*,” Ranboo muttered. “Otherwise it's just... hopeless.” He dropped his gaze back down to his hands.

“It’s not hopeless,” Phil said softly. “Karl... Karl was alone in the end. He didn’t have anyone to help him. But you have us.” Ranboo narrowed his eyes slightly. “We’ll keep you safe.” Ranboo was quiet for a long moment, his face stoic.

“I don’t know if you *can*,” Ranboo said eventually.

It was a statement that caught Techno off guard. As soon as he’d finished reading the diary, he knew Ranboo would be afraid. There was hardly any other emotion someone could feel after hearing a story like that. But until that moment, Ranboo hadn’t wavered in his faith in Phil and Techno, in their ability to help.

Ranboo was right, though. They could keep him from harm, sure, but Dream was in his head. It was a parasite, leeching sanity slowly until all that was left was a shadow of a person. They couldn’t fight it with axes and swords. They couldn’t reason with it.

“You’re right,” Techno said simply. Phil shot him a look, but he shook his head. “We can only do so much ourselves. You can’t kill what you can’t see. We need something else, something more.”

“What about the crown?” Ranboo asked.

“The one Karl gave you?” Phil said, and Ranboo nodded. “It’s lost, isn’t it? Or it broke?”

“But it worked for a while,” Ranboo said. “Karl kept mentioning protection enchantments, how that magic kept Dream at bay.”

“You think we could learn the enchantment?” Phil asked, turning to Techno, but Techno shook his head.

“No. Even Karl admitted he wasn’t as powerful as his father, he couldn’t make somethin’ strong enough. I doubt we’d learn anythin’ fast enough,” Techno said. Phil nodded, his

shoulder's sagging a little. "But that does get me thinking about protection, about what works against Dream, and it's all this *holy magic* stuff."

"You sound skeptical," Phil noted.

"It's a little hard to have faith in a *benevolent God* when a place like the Nether exists," Techno said. He tried to keep as much bitterness as he could from his tone, but he didn't think he was very successful. "My opinion on the subject doesn't really matter anymore. The Totem God's magic worked against Dream, even though the God isn't in this realm anymore. So Dream's got a weakness."

"It makes sense," Phil said. "The Totem God was what stopped the Dreamons the first time. And the Enchanters drew power from the God's life force, if I'm understanding all this correct." Techno hummed.

"Then we need something powerful, like the circlet of Protection, something... *godly*," Ranboo said. There was a silence between them. Techno thought back to everything he'd read, everything Karl had written leading up to his death. "There's an answer," Ranboo said. "There has to be."

An answer.

"He mentioned something here," Techno blurted out, the thought dawning on him so suddenly he hardly processed it before he was speaking. "Right before he went to the village." Techno paged through the diary, stopping at the passage in question. "*Even with the answer at my fingertips... The answer. Here. He left a map; if I open it now... I learn of the Totem's location,*" he paraphrased.

"A map to the Totem God?" Phil asked.

"That's not possible," Ranboo said, shaking his head. "The Totem God isn't around anymore, right? He fled to the End."

“I don’t know if he *fled*,” Techno said. “He certainly left, though. Semantics. It doesn’t matter. The point is, you’re right; the Totem God isn’t on this world anymore. So I don’t think Karl is talking about the God here. Don’t you think he would have mentioned it if he or his father thought the Totem God was still walkin’ around pickin’ daisies somewhere?”

“Then what?” Phil asked.

“Ranboo, mentioned something a while ago about people called *Evokers*, didn’t you?” Techno asked, turning to the kid. “What were you reading?” Ranboo blinked, furrowing his brow for a second before stepping forward toward the spread of book’s he’d been reading through on the floor.

“Um...” Ranboo sifted through the books for a moment, picking up a few to read the titles or the spines before finding what he was looking for. “This one. It’s about sects of Totem God worshipers I think? It talked about witches, Pillagers, Vindicators...”

“Pillagers are religious?” Phil mumbled incredulously as Ranboo opened the book.

“They always did strike me as cult-ish,” Techno shrugged. Phil raised his eyebrows and turned back to Ranboo who was still paging through the book.

“Here,” Ranboo announced eventually, coming to the right section. “Evokers. Uh... *a faction of Enchanters, the Evokers are spellcasters, holding the belief that their purpose by godly proclamation is the protection of the Totems of Undying.*”

“Totems, plural?” Techno asked. Ranboo reread the passage silently before nodding. “What else?” Ranboo skimmed over the page.

“*Evokers build their communities in mansions built deep into dark oak jungles... intentionally difficult to locate... naturally hostile to outsiders,*” he read. “*Capable of summoning Vexes... what’s a Vex?*” Techno and Phil both shrugged. Ranboo hummed and kept reading. “Oh, here; *the Evokers protect their holy charge with such ferocity that little is known about the totems themselves, only that a totem is an objects intended to serve as a*

channel for the God's life force. A totem is said to be a powerful source of holy protection, but the Evokers are forbidden from using them to their true purpose."

"Yes," Techno said, determination filling his voice. He walked around the table to look over Ranboo's shoulder at the page from the book. "That. They're not *the* Totem of Undying, they're *a* Totem of Undying. It's a physical thing. *Holy protection*." Techno leaned in. In the margins, there was a note scrawled in faded charcoal, written in enchanted. "What's that say?" He asked Ranboo. Ranboo tilted his head to read it, narrowing his eyes at the text.

"According to... oh wow, it's really smudged... *le... legends— according to legends, a totem can save the holder ever— no . Even. Even from death,*" Ranboo read. Techno furrowed his brow.

"Like... immortality?" Phil asked.

"Seems far-fetched," Techno muttered.

"All of this seems far-fetched," Phil pointed out.

"Good point," Techno shrugged. "*Save you from death* is a theory I'd rather not test out for ourselves, though."

"Agreed," Ranboo said quietly. "Karl... Karl mentioned a map. One he didn't want to show to— to Dream." Techno nodded, looking back to the page in the diary.

"*He left a map, but it is too late,*" Techno read again. "I'm guessing *he* is Karl's father — *If I open it now, if I learn of the Totem's location, it will be knowledge that Dream will use against us ... it will seek out the Evokers treasure, and it will destroy them until there is nothing left that can stop it.*"

"So... where's the map?" Phil asked. They were all silent for a moment. "This feels like a wild goose chase," Phil added with a sigh.

“At least we’ve got a goose,” Techno shrugged, ignoring the look he got in return from Phil. “If I were a map to a mansion full of witches, where would I be?”

“There’s nothing in the diaries about where he put it?” Phil asked, and Techno shook his head.

“No, only that it exists. And that he didn’t want to look at it,” he said. “If Dream knows everything that its vessel knows, then hiding it somewhere crazy would be pointless. I think we’re looking for some kind of lockbox or safe. We should look around more.” Phil nodded, and Ranboo followed behind them when they exited the main stronghold room and began walking down the narrow halls in the rest of the structure.

As they began to investigate the stronghold, Techno found himself wondering if Ranboo had truly begun to process what they’d just discovered. The diaries had spurred no memories, but even so, Techno had expected... well, he didn’t know what he expected. At this point, not much surprised him. As soon as *mind controlling demons of chaos* entered the game, there was not much room to get weirder.

Techno just didn’t know how long Ranboo could keep this up. He’d been soldiering ever forward on blind determination alone, following a trail that could potentially lead them nowhere. And he was holding onto that determination as best he could with what little they were given. Maybe it was because Dream had been oddly dormant as of late. Techno still didn’t know what that meant, though if he had to venture a guess, he had two theories; one, that Dream had exhausted himself after taking control of Ranboo in the village, and was building up strength (an unsettling notion); or two, that everything they’d been doing *since* the village was exactly what Dream wanted (an *more* unsettling notion).

It could be said, as Phil had pointed out, that now at the very least they at least knew Ranboo’s past. But if Techno was being honest with himself, which was surprisingly common these days, his focus was no longer *on* Ranboo’s past. As far as Techno was concerned, it was solved, and it was terrible. Karl had done Ranboo the favor of keeping him in as much blissful ignorance as he could. Techno wondered how much of the events that unfolded Ranboo had truly known about then, if he knew the village he loved was slowly falling into madness, if he knew what Karl intended to do. He wasn’t optimistic they’d ever know the answer to those questions, though. And he didn’t intend to wait upon those details— that wasn’t what was going to save them. And if Ranboo *did* remember, Techno wasn’t so sure it would be a good thing.

All signs pointed them forwards, now.

It was an odd shift in the narrative. They'd spent so long hunting down Ranboo's past, searching for the answers that had remained, until recently, elusive. Techno didn't like riddles. He didn't like feeling like all of the information was there, but he just wasn't grasping it. It made him feel useless. A good mystery gave you all the pieces, gave you hope. To be fair, Techno also never had much hope that this was a *good mystery*. But now that riddle was solved, no matter how agonizing the solution had been.

They had a path in front of them once again, one that had a distinct end point this time. And even better, it was an endpoint that wasn't a literal massacre. He hoped. They couldn't possibly have luck *that* bad...

The stronghold's layout was fairly compact, with narrow, winding hallways that let out into small rooms every so often. They found what appeared to be a pantry, still half stocked with cured meats, hanging herbs, and jars of preserves. There was a room with brewing stands that looked as though a tornado had run through it, a room with furnaces and smokers and chests full of coal, a room filled with clumps of dirt and grass and dotted with little red flowers that had long since wilted.

It wasn't hard to imagine life here. It felt like how the village felt; a time capsule, preserving the last moment of peace in perfect stillness. It was messy, cluttered, disordered in such a way that everything was both out of place and right where it belonged at the same time. It reminded Techno of Phil's house, in a way, full of collections and sentiment and *shiny things*, as Phil put it. Phil took home whatever caught his eye, no matter how much trouble it got him into. Karl, it seemed, was the same way. In every room, there were trunks and drawers and boxes that were overloaded with all kinds of things, papers and potion ingredients, trinkets, notes, a rare gem or two, and an occasional piece of flint or chunk of charcoal.

But eventually among all the winding halls and cluttered rooms, they found a promising contender for a safe. At the end of a long hallway, they'd found a narrow staircase that led down further into the earth. At the bottom was a small room that contained only a few items; notably, against the back wall, there was a long, dark wood and iron chest with letters carved into the top of it in Enchanted. Leaned up against the wall to the right of the chest was a netherite sword, fractured into pieces. The hilt was dotted with cracked gemstones, and the pieces of the blade looked brittle like coal, dented and scuffed from years of use. In the other

corner of the room was an overflowing basket of lapis lazuli, the stones glittering in the blue lantern light.

When they got to the base of the stairs, Techno and Phil entered first, with Ranboo following behind them hesitantly. Techno leaned over to look at the sword, though he kept his distance from the blade. It looked as though even breathing on it wrong would shatter it further. Techno wondered if it had belonged to Karl or his father. There were more runes carved into it, all along the length of the blade.

Techno wondered what it would be like to wield an enchanted weapon. He wondered how much better it would truly make the blade. As he examined the sword, he found himself curious if enchantments were something a person could learn, if there was a way he and Phil and Ranboo could use the knowledge stored here and begin to uncover the knowledge Karl and his father left behind.

It wasn't a priority at the moment... but in the future, when they had time, when they were safe, Techno wanted to read through each and every one of those books in Karl's library. He wanted to know.

"Can you read what's written on the chest?" Phil asked, leaning over the letters carved into the wood. Ranboo inched closer, but seemed like he wanted to put as much distance between the chest and himself as he could.

"*Protection,*" Ranboo read. Phil nodded, looking to Techno. "It... it feels strong. Can you feel that?"

Techno and Phil shared a look. Techno felt nothing out of the ordinary, just the same musty dampness of the stronghold. From Phil's face, it appeared he felt the same.

"It's just— I don't know how to explain it. It makes my skin crawl."

"Protection repels evil, right?" Phil asked.

“Think so,” Techno answered. “But I’m no expert in enchantments.”

“Not that you’re evil, mate,” Phil said hurriedly to Ranboo, but Ranboo waved him off, still watching the chest with caution.

Techno reached his hand out toward the chest, but hesitated. “You think it’s trapped?” He asked, turning to Phil.

“It doesn’t... *look* trapped?” Phil supplied.

“Helpful,” Techno muttered, and Phil shrugged.

“Well, there’s no lock on it. It’s not hidden. Usually, I’d say that’s a bad sign, but this whole *place* was hidden. And Karl had no reason to hide anything from the Haunting, so maybe... maybe it’s *just* meant to keep out evil?”

“Well, what do you think counts as *evil*? ” Techno asked. “If it’s based on morals alone, I dunno if I’m the best candidate...”

Techno had made a fair share of poor choices in his life. Choices he regretted. Choices he’d view as evil, if he had to label them. But at the same time, he was no chaos incarnate. Before Phil could answer his question, he reached forward and poked the chest with his finger. Nothing happened. *Might as well commit, now*. With both hands, he put his fingers under the lip of the lid and pulled.

He honestly hadn’t expected it to open. He expected it to be locked tight despite it’s appearance by some godly magic that they’d never be able to undo unless they threw it off of a cliff or dropped a creeper on it or something, but instead, the chest lid creaked loudly and shuddered, a thin cloud of dust falling from the top as the lid lifted.

When the chest opened, Techno could practically feel Ranboo relax. The kid had been emanating tension until then, but once the seal of the chest was broken, it seemed like a

weight lifted. Techno wondered what would have happened if Ranboo tried to open it, or if Dream would even let him... he didn't want to linger on it.

The chest held several books, each of them seeming almost to emit their own light. Their covers and spines glimmered with purple and white. The leather on their covers was carved with Enchanted runes. Next to the books were a few loose sheets of paper.

Laid on top of all of this was a trident.

The three pronged spear was made from a material Techno didn't recognize, greyish-blue and pulsing with the same purple light as the books, though more faded. It looked damaged, spiderwebs of cracks running down the prongs and handle, a handle which was carved with more Enchanted runes.

Techno knelt in front of the chest and picked up the trident. It was lighter than he expected, but picking it up, it felt almost electric, like a dull static under his skin. It was subtle, but it was there. He set it on the ground at his feet, moving to pick up the stack of papers instead. He leaned back, flipping through the papers, feeling Ranboo and Phil's eyes on him, waiting.

The first two pages looked like recipes, one labeled *Invisibility* and the other labeled *Harming*. The third was a family tree, names branching off and connected to each other like creeping vines.

The fourth paper was a map.

It was folded in fourths, but even before opening it up, Techno felt his heart skip a beat. It was drawn in ink, not charcoal, with thin lines drawing out woods and hills and structures that looked like castles and towers that Techno doubted were still standing now. It looked older than nearly anything else they'd seen so far, so old Techno handled it like it was about to turn into dust and float away.

In the bottom right section of the map, there was a dense forest drawn, and in the center, a structure that Techno could only assume was a mansion. In the center of the structure, there was a small seal of gold wax.

“Is that— is that it?” Phil asked, almost in disbelief. In lieu of answering, Techno passed the map into his hands.

“Really?” Ranboo asked. He stepped forward, leaning in to look at the map, but Techno nudged Phil’s hand so it was angled in a way Ranboo couldn’t see. Ranboo looked at him in confusion.

“Karl didn’t want Dream seein’ this, right? Everything you see, it sees,” Techno explained.

“Oh,” Ranboo said, seemingly disappointed, and Techno felt guilty at their need to keep things secret from him even now. “But…” He stared at the map with burning curiosity etched into his face, but his voice trailed off, the anticipation of the search fizzling out.

“Better safe than sorry, mate,” Phil said. “We don’t know enough about Dream to say for sure what it’s got planned, but if Karl went to this length to keep the map hidden from it, maybe you should leave it to us to figure out the route there.”

Ranboo looked disheartened, looking at the map in Phil’s hands almost longingly, but he didn’t protest their reasoning. Though it wasn’t the map that Techno was necessarily worried about; Karl wasn’t hiding the *map*, he was hiding the *totems*. He was confident that Dream would find a way to destroy them, to destroy what he called the *answer*.

“Well…” Techno hesitated, glancing back down at the map. He sighed. There was no easy way to say this. “Are we sure Ranboo should go?” Phil and Ranboo both blinked at him. “Look, I know we’ve got our next step laid out in front of us now, but… Karl seemed pretty adamant about not letting the Dreamon near that mansion.”

“I— I can’t go with you?” Ranboo asked. The waver in his voice made Techno wince.

“Ranboo—”

“No, we— we have the next step now, right? You can’t leave me here *now* —”

“We’re not leavin’ you anywhere,” Techno said, cutting him off before he could begin to spiral down that road. “All I’m suggesting is maybe Phil or I go to the mansion on our own, and you wait here with the other. As a precaution.”

“I don’t *want* to wait here!” Ranboo’s voice cracked. “I want to stay with *you* , with both of you, I can’t just sit here in the dark and wait. If something’s in that mansion, I need to know.”

“I know, Ranboo, I know— I just have a bad feeling about it,” Techno said, keeping his voice steady. “Especially with Dream bein’ so quiet... I don’t want you gettin’ hurt.”

“Don’t make me stay here,” Ranboo pleaded. Techno winced at how desperate he sounded. “Dream being so quiet is a *good* thing, I— I feel like I can finally think clearly.”

“Techno might be right, mate. What if something goes wrong there?” Phil said.

“What if something goes wrong *here*? ” Ranboo asked. “I don’t know what Dream’s up to any more than you do. If he does anything, what does it matter if I’m here or there? I’m safer when I’m with both of you,” Ranboo pointed out. “Please,” he added softly.

He was afraid. Techno knew he was afraid. He had a right to be; afraid of hurting himself, afraid of hurting them, afraid he’d end up like Karl, or worse. Afraid he’d bring on the end of times. And how could he not be? Techno sighed, looking at Phil.

“It’s a good point,” Phil admitted. “I don’t like the idea of being so far from each other. A lot could go wrong.” Techno knew he should hold his ground, but seeing Ranboo so desperate to feel safe made his stomach twist. But maybe he and Phil were right. If they were so far apart, how would they know if something went wrong with the other? They couldn’t afford to take risks, but both options seemed difficult to justify.

“I guess,” Techno said. “*Safety in numbers* and all that.” Ranboo nodded, his eyes still searching for the answer he wanted to hear. “If we all think it’s the best route forward, then fine. I’m not callin’ all the shots on my own, here.”

“We’ll keep a close eye on each other,” Phil said with a nod.

We’ll keep a close eye on Ranboo was the implication, of course, but singling the kid out over and over again wouldn’t do much more than stress him out. Techno didn’t like it, but on the other hand, he wasn’t sure if he’d like to leave Ranboo behind in the stronghold with Phil without knowing what was going on. Phil probably felt the same.

“Looks like we’re back on the road,” Phil said. “Let’s hope this mansion isn’t on the other side of the world.”

“God, wouldn’t that just be the cherry on top,” Techno muttered.

Phil motioned for them to walk back up the stairs, out of the little room. Ranboo followed behind him, but Techno paused, picking up the trident again from the ground before he went as well. It had the same electric buzz to it as before.

“If Karl’s father made a map to it, I’d think that means it’s gotta be nearby,” Phil said over his shoulder as he climbed. “Doesn’t sound like they moved around much before he died.”

Techno hummed. When they got to the top of the stairs, Ranboo paused, looking back at Techno and the trident in his hand. He narrowed his eyes slightly at the weapon, but didn’t say anything about it. They made their way back to the library.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Okay, I know it's a little later than I anticipated, but I'm moving right now and stuff is pretty chaotic! I'm going to try to get the next chapter out within a week, but I'll keep you updated here in this end note on how that's going!

Can't believe this fic is 2/3 of the way done. That's bonkers. Thank you all for sticking with me and continuing to read!!! I appreciate each and every one of you :)

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your fav fics <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

8/14 - found a plothole, filled it in :) i'm still moving into my new place but i think if the next chapter is delayed, it won't be by much!

8/18 - ok i know i haven't been posting many updates,,, but,,,,, next chapter potentially will be out today around 9pm est,,,, :0

8/18 again – def posting tonight :)))))) proof reading rn :)))))) you're all gonna hate me a lil, but that's ok :)

Marionette

Chapter Summary

“I know you don’t like it, but it’s safer this way,” Techno said with a sigh. Ranboo said nothing. They’d already had this argument, and Ranboo knew there was no changing their minds no matter how much he wanted to keep them all together. Phil didn’t like leaving them either, but he’d feel worse if they took Ranboo to the mansion and something bad happened. He felt like they’d been a little too lucky recently. He wasn’t about to do anything to challenge that.

“Just be careful,” Phil said quietly to Techno. He felt bad treating Ranboo like an explosion waiting to happen, but it was reality.

“You too,” Techno said.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’ll leave the map with you,” Phil said. He passed the folded paper into Techno’s waiting hand. “Just in case.”

“You’re sure you know how to get there from here?” Techno asked.

“It should be pretty easy to spot from above,” Phil said. “Something that big has got to be visible from the air.”

Techno nodded, tucking the map into his pocket. Phil peered out at the dark oak forest that surrounded the mouth of the cave they’d found, tilting his head back to look at the immense height of the dense trees around them.

The trek to the forest wasn’t as long as Phil had expected. As it turned out, Karl had settled in a stronghold that was midway between his father’s old home and the mansion, which cut a significant amount of time out of their travel. He wondered if Karl did this on purpose, or if it was just a coincidence. In any case, they were all grateful they didn’t have another week-long journey ahead of them. They’d found their way to the darkwood after two days of travel.

As they grew nearer to the location of the mansion, though, there was another obstacle to consider; even though they'd agreed it would be a bad idea to split up and go so far from each other, the idea of Ranboo exploring the mansion with them still felt like a risk not worth taking. To Ranboo's dismay, they'd decided that he and Techno would stay behind, away from the mansion, while Phil flew out to it and searched the place.

A ways out from where they anticipated the mansion was, they'd found a clearing in the woods with a shallow cave to set up camp in where they decided Techno and Ranboo would stay while Phil was gone. It had a good amount of cover, and the clearing in the woods made it easier to see if there were any mobs finding their way toward them. So far they'd been able to avoid most encounters since the tree cover was so dense, but the darkness provided by the canopy of leaves overhead meant more mobs made their home in these woods.

"I'll keep an eye out for the signal fire," Phil noted, unfurling his wings and shaking his feathers out. "If anything happens, just throw the leaves on and it should make enough smoke to see from a mile away."

Ranboo and Techno both nodded, but Ranboo still looked reluctant, skeptical at their choice to split up. Techno looked over, noticing the look on his face as well.

"I know you don't like it, but it's safer this way," Techno said with a sigh. Ranboo said nothing. They'd already had this argument, and Ranboo knew there was no changing their minds no matter how much he wanted to keep them all together. Phil didn't like leaving them either, but he'd feel worse if they took Ranboo to the mansion and something bad happened. He felt like they'd been a little too lucky recently. He wasn't about to do anything to challenge that.

"Just be careful," Phil said quietly to Techno. He felt bad treating Ranboo like an explosion waiting to happen, but it was reality.

"You too," Techno said. "I don't know what you're gonna find there, but I'd assume it's hostile until proven otherwise..." Phil nodded.

“I’ll come back before dark, even if I don’t find anything,” he said, mostly for Ranboo’s sake to quell the nervousness he could feel practically emanating from the boy. Ranboo looked up at him, nodding hesitantly. “I’ll be fine. And *you’ll* be fine, too. As long as Techno doesn’t bore you to death.”

“*Hey,*” Techno huffed. “I’m a delight to be around.”

“Mhm,” Phil hummed, raising an eyebrow at him, and Techno rolled his eyes. “Alright. Try not to get into any trouble.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Techno grumbled. Phil smiled, stepping forward to pat Ranboo gently on the shoulder as he let his wings spread.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said as reassuringly as he could. Ranboo let out a breath and nodded, but didn’t meet Phil’s eye. Phil sighed, stepping back to give himself enough space to take off. With one final look at Techno, he launched himself into the air, beating his wings hard to get up and over the dense canopy of oak leaves.

He ignored the anxiety tightening in his chest. The three of them had spent every waking moment together for so long, it felt strange leaving Techno and Ranboo behind even if it was only briefly. It felt strange to be alone, left to the quiet self reflection that came with isolation. Phil had always enjoyed being with other people.

Even in silence, when he and Techno would just sit on opposite sides of the same room doing their own activities independently, Phil felt like just having another person in the room with him gave off a certain sound. He’d always been curious to know if that was a trait of his phantom hybrid, a need to find community, to find a flock. To find family. Phantom hybrids were rare, so it wasn’t exactly like he could ask around, but he always saw the birds themselves flying in pairs at the very least.

Regardless, flying alone left him with a bit too much time stuck in his own head. Instead of spending his time worrying about how Ranboo and Techno were doing, he kept his eyes on the woods below him, scanning the tree tops for signs of the mansion. Part of him was worried it wouldn’t be there at all, that he’d spend hours flying in circles over the dark forest and returning with nothing to show for it.

But not long after he set out, among the many layers of thick dark oak leaves, he began to see a flat roof emerging amid the trees. As Phil flew closer, he inspected the structure. The roof was made from sturdy hardwood that sloped ever so slightly downwards. There were trails of moss and faded water stains where rain had run off of the surface, and more moss and vines growing on the cobblestone and hardwood sides of the massive building.

He circled around the structure, looking for any signs of life in the building, but as he flew closer it seemed this place, like so many others, was now abandoned and desolate. The massive windows were dark, not a single torch or lantern lighting the inside, and there were cobwebs in every corner. It looked like it hadn't been cared for in at least a few years, if not more.

Phil tucked his wings, diving down between the trees to the forest floor at the front of the mansion. There were a few short stairs leading up to the open entrance, the doorway bordered on either side by tall windows. Its two huge doors sat wide open. Phil approached cautiously, pulling his sword from its sheath for good measure. He walked up to the entrance, peering inside.

The floor was made of pale wood planks covered with red and white carpets, eaten away slightly by termites and vermin. There were stairs that led up, branching out to either side of the entrance to the second floor. Lanterns hung from the ceiling and walls, but they were all long since extinguished, gathering spiderwebs inside the glass casings. It was quiet, save for the occasional creak of wood as wind blew through the woods. It was lit by the sparse sunlight coming in from outside through the large windows.

Phil pulled one of the lanterns off of its hook from just inside the doorway. It still had oil left in it. He blew the cobwebs out from the inside. The wick was dirty, but it seemed like it would still burn, and in a mansion made entirely of wood, Phil would feel much safer with a contained flame rather than a torch.

He pulled a tinder box from his bag and lit the lantern, watching the flame flicker unsteadily before it stabilized. He kept the matches out, hoping he'd find a few more lanterns as he went that were still usable. Wandering in complete darkness wasn't appealing.

No point in putting it off, Phil thought to himself. He sighed, stepping further into the mansion with his sword in one hand and the lantern held high in the other. The floorboards creaked as he walked in.

The ceilings of the mansion were so tall Phil could hardly see all the way to the top of the first floor in the dim light. The corners were dark. He kept an eye out, watching for any of the larger spiders that sometimes lurked up high on walls in dark places like this.

Whenever Phil encountered an undead mob, he couldn't help but wonder who the creature had been in its past life. He didn't feel much guilt in killing them anymore; he'd long since rationalized their existence, coming to terms with the fact that there was no going back for skeletons and zombies who had already been revived in this new form. But it still felt strange cutting something down that was so clearly once human.

The undead mobs were just another reminder of the life force that ran through this world. It was strange to think it could be so strong, even after the Totem God had disappeared. After all this time, villagers still buried their dead far from their homes so that if they were raised, they wouldn't put anyone in danger.

As Phil pushed his sword through the ribcage of the skeleton in front of him, he wondered if this one had been an Evoker. He wrenched his sword upward and shattered the fragile bones into pieces, and the mob dropped to the ground, dead once again, for good this time. He looked down at it, the stark white bones illuminated by the lantern he held in his hand, before stepping around it to continue down the basement hallway.

The mansion was surprisingly neat. It wasn't cluttered with decorations and trinkets the way the stronghold was, nor was it frozen in time the way the village was.

There were rooms that Phil could recognize as living spaces, dining rooms with stone tables, bedrooms with fireplaces and pots for plants that had long since died, a small library with

some history books Phil recognized and a few he didn't. There was a greenhouse full of wilted saplings, a room full of chests, an open space with a large map sprawled across the center table and chairs surrounding it.

Some rooms, Phil couldn't quite piece together the meaning of. It was hard to determine exactly what they were used for, like one that was lined with cobblestone with a ledge on the back wall that had a single flower pot, the flower withered and drooping now, or one with a massive slab of obsidian that seemed out of place here.

There was no sign of a struggle, nor a sign that this place was quickly abandoned as they had seen in the village and the stronghold. There weren't bodies or blood. Phil didn't know if that was a good sign or not. If the Evokers had moved, they would have taken the totem with them. But he also couldn't see any reason for them to have left this place. The book Ranboo had read from certainly didn't make them out to be a nomadic people by any means, and the sheer magnitude of this structure made it clear that they had settled with the intention of staying here for a long time.

He stopped at every window he found, peering outside to search the sky for any sign of smoke from the signal fire back where Ranboo and Techno had stayed. He wondered how they were doing, what they were talking about. It had been a long time since either of them had caught a moment alone with Ranboo – or alone in general, for that matter.

Though at this point Phil would frankly prefer a moment alone with Techno, not Ranboo. After everything they learned and saw, Phil could only hope that he and Techno were on the same page with their interpretations of all this. There were times he wished he could pull Techno aside, if only just to make sure he wasn't the only one hyper analyzing Ranboo's every move, or to confirm that Techno was also, in fact, reeling from the situation at hand, but to do so would leave Ranboo alone, and that was an even more worrying thought.

If this totem plan worked out though, maybe they would finally have a moment's peace. Phil felt selfish for thinking about himself in this– whatever paranoia and fear he or Techno felt, Ranboo was feeling it tenfold– but he also knew he and Techno both were feeling the effects of constantly feeling so watched. It was turning into an exhaustion Phil couldn't shake.

At the very least, he felt some of that anxiousness dissipate when he saw that the skies were still clear of any smoke from the signal fire.

He'd swept over the top two floors thoroughly before making his way down to the basement floor. Phil didn't like basements particularly. Being underground made him feel claustrophobic, even when he was in his own cellar in the tundra. He tried his best not to spend too much time there. Here, at least, the ceilings were high. The lack of daylight was the only thing that really clued Phil in that he was underground.

He had lit a few lanterns as he went down the halls and ventured through rooms, doing his best to give himself as much light as possible. Getting caught fighting in the dark was not a situation he wanted to find himself in. Fending off the two skeletons, zombie, and spider he'd encountered so far was a bit unnerving even in the dim light he was provided by the lanterns. He was just grateful he hadn't encountered a creeper in the time he'd been in here. In the dark, they seemed to come out of nowhere. He could only hope the creaky hardwood floors would give them away. That, or the slight smell of ash they tended to emit.

The basement of the mansion was stone, though, made from thick slabs that lowered the temperature by a noticeable amount and made the whole lower level smell crisp and cool. There were several rooms here that Phil could see being worship rooms with shrines made from polished stone and banners hung between pillars of cobblestone.

Phil had never been particularly religious. He had known a few villages who still worshipped the Totem God, even visited a church once with a huge stained glass window on the front that depicted a pure gold man with emerald eyes, standing tall with his arms out. Even though Phil had no ties to the God, he still felt awe seeing it lit up by sparkling rays of sun, casting warm light across the inside from the pews right up to the shrine.

One of these days, he'd learn how to make stained glass, if only for aesthetic purposes.

At the very end of the long hallway, he found yet another zombie. He figured he'd find a lot of mobs here. They were always drawn to dark places, and especially underground, he'd frankly anticipated finding more than he had.

Zombies weren't difficult to take down. They rarely used weapons, if ever, unlike skeletons or zombified piglins who clung to whatever weapons and armor they had on them when they'd turned. This zombie hadn't even noticed Phil was there by the time he drove his sword through its neck, and it dropped heavily to the ground.

As it did, Phil found himself thinking back to their time travelling through the Nether, when they'd encountered that pack of piglins there. When Ranboo had picked up this very sword and demonstrated an instinct with the blade that Phil or Techno had never expected. Karl had noted in the diary that he had gone through some combat training, and he had clearly retained the muscle memory even if he didn't remember the training itself.

He wondered if this Sapnap person was a good swordsman.

He wondered which body in the village belonged to him.

The hallway Phil had been walking down turned sharply to the left at the end. As he rounded the corner, a huge sprawling room opened up before him, so massive that the lantern only lit up the very entrance.

It was entirely stone, carved into elaborate pillars with decorations at the top and bottom, creating rows of arches that vanished into shadow in the distant corners of the room. The walls were made of flat stone bricks, pale lichen growing in the cracks, and there were small alcoves carved into them that held candles. Wax dripped from the ledges. On either side of the indents were letters carved in Enchanted.

The pattern went as far as Phil could see. He walked into the room, watching as the light from his lantern made the shadows from the columns rotate on the floor, moving like the shadows of trees did as the sun rose in the morning. He walked closer to the walls and found that on either side of the inlets there were large, square panels, polished so smooth they reflected light. There were metal rings attached to them at the center almost like pulls on a cabinet.

This was a crypt. Phil realized it the moment before he pulled on the handle, dropping it abruptly. It clinked against the stone. What else could it be? If he opened these panels, he'd find caskets, he was sure of it. The room felt a bit more cold.

There were more panels like this lining the walls all the way down. They were sealed, marked by candles in the walls and noted with the letters in Enchanted. Phil wondered if the writing was their names.

These must be the graves of the Evokers.

So they hadn't left, then. Quite the opposite. They'd stayed until they were no more, until they had buried themselves and vanished from history. Phil couldn't help but wonder who the last one left alive had been; who had been the one to bury the rest until there was no one to bury him?

Phil peered down to the end of the room, squinting his eyes against the darkness. He couldn't see the other end. He held the lantern up, listening closely for any sounds that might indicate a hostile mob, searching for spiders in the corners where the pillars met the ceiling. He was sure he'd find mobs down here. It was the perfect environment. The last thing he needed was to get swarmed. Techno would never let him live it down if he got jumped by a baby zombie just because he wasn't paying attention.

He had just barely stepped another foot further into the crypt when he started to smell burning.

It was faint, just a hint of a scent of smoke. He looked around, half expecting to see a candle had lit itself. He wouldn't put it past this place to be haunted. But then he remembered what he'd told Techno and Ranboo, and his stomach dropped.

If anything happens, just throw the leaves on and it should make enough smoke to see from a mile away.

He nearly dropped the lantern with how quickly he turned on his heels to get back to the ground floor.

He pumped his wings behind him to gain momentum, exiting the crypt and skidding around the corner back down the hallway. It was almost baffling that he could smell the smoke from here; he couldn't have been down in the basement that long for it to have grown large enough to produce so much smoke, but as he ran up the stairs, the smell continued to grow.

When he got to the ground floor, he ran to the nearest window, leaning against the windowsill to inspect the skies in the direction he'd flown in from. There was nothing but blue skies and pale wisps of clouds. Phil furrowed his brow. That didn't make sense. The smell of smoke was still there, which meant the signal fire should have been huge.

He rounded the corner to the hallway that led to the main entrance, and his feet slowed to a stop. There was orange light spilling from around the bend at the far end of the hallway. Thick black smoke bloomed across the ceiling, creeping like ivy as it grew closer. He felt a building anxiety beginning to grip his chest.

He set the lantern down silently on the hardwood floor, positioning his sword at the ready. He hoped it was just a fluke; a zombie who knocked over one of the lanterns he'd lit, perhaps. But he knew.

The ceilings were high enough to keep the smoke up over his head. He ducked slightly anyway, approaching the turn in the hallway carefully without a single clue what he should anticipate seeing there. With a short breath of anticipation, he rounded the corner.

He couldn't say he hadn't seen it coming.

The trip had been too easy. Dream had been too quiet. It had to come crashing down at some point.

In front of him, standing before a blazing fire that engulfed the whole hallway behind him, was Ranboo. He stood with his back turned. The fire cast a shadow behind him, ruffling his hair with waves of heat. He held a lantern in one hand, the glass shattered, the little door hanging open as flaming oil dripped down to the ground like liquid fire.

In the other hand, he held Technoblade's axe.

Despite the fire, Phil felt cold.

“Ranboo,” Phil called. Ranboo tilted his head. It was an unnatural movement. A chill went down Phil’s spine.

Ranboo turned slowly until he was facing Phil head on. He looked so familiar, and yet so foreign. The fire behind him illuminated the edges of his hair and clothes, making the flecks of purple and white stand out in his bicolored skin.

Phil couldn’t help but see the resemblance to when he’d seen Ranboo standing in the kitchen fire, how he’d come down the stairs to see the boy illuminated by flames, trying desperately to extinguish what he could, panic so evident on his face. There was no panic, now.

“This is awkward,” Ranboo said, almost sheepishly, as if he wasn’t standing in front of a blazing fire and holding the very tool he’d used to start the blaze. The look in his eyes was off, almost vengeful. He was carrying himself differently, his shoulders too relaxed, posture too straight, a confidence about him that bordered on arrogance.

“Dream,” Phil said. The word left his mouth involuntarily, a realization that couldn’t be held back even if he tried. Ranboo rolled his eyes— or Dream rolled his eyes... Phil couldn’t even rationalize what he was seeing. It was Ranboo in front of him, flesh and blood, but it *wasn’t*. He was a puppet. It didn’t make sense.

“Fantastic detective work,” Dream said. “Do you want a prize?”

Its voice was distinctly separate from Ranboo’s, void of any of the tone and cadence that Ranboo used when he spoke. It made Phil sick to his stomach. But it was *Ranboo* who moved his mouth, *Ranboo* who made the sound. Phil tightened his grip on the sword, his knuckles going white.

There was blood on the axe in Ranboo’s hand, *Techno’s* axe, trailing down the blade in dried streaks.

Ranboo's clothes were dotted with dark red.

There were flecks on his face, standing out against the white side of his skin.

No.

“Where’s Techno?” Phil asked. His voice shook. He couldn’t help the fear that seeped into his words. Ranboo blinked at him.

This can't be happening.

It wasn’t him. It wasn’t Ranboo. He was different. From the way he stood to the energy that surrounded him; it felt sour. Phil knew what this thing was capable of. He’d seen it. He’d seen it, and he’d still left Techno alone with it.

The corners of Ranboo’s mouth curled up, a smile that looked disgustingly unnatural on his face.

“Where is Techno?” Phil demanded, his stomach sinking. Dream said nothing. Phil’s grip tightened on his sword. *Please*. “What did you do?”

Chapter End Notes

>:0

I'm evil, I know. This chapter definitely was more description/summary heavy than my usual work, but hopefully,,,, I will make it up to you soon,,,, feel free to voice your feelings in the comments, perhaps it will fuel me,,,

(pls dont kill me)

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

8/24 – sorry I haven't posted as many updates as I usually do for the upcoming chapter, but I promise I'm working on it! it's a bit tricky, so it's going to be a little delayed. I'm aiming for getting it out on friday at the latest!

8/27 – i was going to post tonight, but given the news about techno i just don't feel comfortable doing so. if you can, go give him some support on his latest video <3 hope ur all doing okay

Puppeteer

Chapter Summary

“No, you...” Phil muttered, that same horror plastered on his face as well. “Ranboo wouldn’t let you—”

“Let me?” Dream laughed. “You’re even more naive than I thought, aren’t you?” He turned the axe over, inspecting it. The blade was illuminated in the light of the fire that slowly grew behind him. “You’re so blind, Philza. You and Technoblade. You believed so firmly that you had any semblance of a chance.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It didn’t take very long for blood to dry— much shorter than people usually expected. The blood on the axe was already flakey and chipping off in small pieces, making the blade look dull and worn despite the meticulous care that had been given to it in its lifetime.

The blood on Ranboo’s hands and face was similarly dried, cracking as his skin moved and tensed and stretched. It was under his fingernails and covering his hand, dotting his clothes, flecked on his face, on his cheek, under his eye.

Ranboo wanted to reach up and wipe the blood away. He wanted to scrub it from his hands, from under his nails. He wanted to drop the axe, throw the lantern into the fire and run into Phil’s arms. He wanted to scream.

But of course, if Dream’s vessels always got what they wanted, it wouldn’t be nearly as much fun to torment them like this.

With Philza standing in front of him and a fire blazing behind, Dream had placed Ranboo exactly where he wanted him. The pieces had finally fallen into place. It made the agonizing wait so much more worthwhile.

“I don’t think either of us need to worry very much about our friend Technoblade anymore,” Dream said, a smile creeping onto his face.

He felt no need to hide his giddiness. So much had led to this moment, he could allow himself the indulgence of savoring this feeling. The look on Philza’s face made it so much more delicious.

“I don’t believe you,” Phil said, but the tremble in his voice betrayed him.

“Liar,” Dream taunted. Phil’s grip on his sword tightened so much Dream could practically hear his knuckles crack. “Oh come on. You’ve seen what I can do. You really think I’d hold back?” Phil shook his head. “Techno put up a good fight, I’ll admit. But a stuck pig still bleeds.”

And oh, how Techno *bled*. Ranboo was holding the memory so firmly at the front of his mind that it was easy for Dream to dip back into it, to recall the warmth of the blood when Ranboo had sunk the dagger into Techno’s stomach, the spray when he’d planted the axe in his neck, the glistening red pool that gathered beneath the beast, and a final look of betrayal in his eyes as Ranboo killed him, as Ranboo let him die, standing over his body.

Dream would make sure Ranboo remembered this. He’d show it to him again and again, just to feel the power that came with that surge of fear and horror and agony.

“No, you…” Phil muttered, that same horror plastered on his face as well. “Ranboo wouldn’t let you—”

“*Let me?*” Dream laughed. “You’re even more naive than I thought, aren’t you?” He turned the axe over, inspecting it. The blade was illuminated in the light of the fire that slowly grew behind him. “You’re so blind, Philza. You *and* Technoblade. You believed so *firmly* that you had any semblance of a chance.”

“We do. He’s in there, he’s— Ranboo, I *know* you’re in there,” Phil said, pleading. It was pathetic.

“Oh, he’s in here,” Dream said, rolling his eyes. He stepped forward. Phil stepped back. The fear the man felt was so thinly veiled, Dream wondered why he even tried to hide it at all. “Clawing like a rat in a cage.” Dream tapped his fingers against his forehead. “He can hear you, you know. He could hear Technoblade, too. Hear him *beg*. ”

Stop, Ranboo wailed, scratching away to be let back into his own mind. *Just let him live. Please, just let him live.*

Dream smiled. The fire roared behind him. It made the back of this body’s neck feel warm, the skin there tingling and prickling the same way it did when Ranboo warmed his hands by the fire for just a little too long. Words couldn’t explain how much Dream yearned to truly feel that again. He knew Ranboo felt the warmth of the fire on his skin, but Dream couldn’t. It wasn’t *his* body. It wasn’t *his* skin. A vessel could only make him feel so much. It was like a shadow of a sensation.

In theory, he could just step back into the fire now. With enough pain, close enough to death, Ranboo would be forced to teleport. He wasn’t present enough now to keep himself grounded to this world, wasn’t strong enough, just a weak little thing holding on for dear life. But honestly, that sounded just a little too *boring* to Dream. He figured he might as well have fun.

“Did you know I can’t feel pain?” Dream said coldly. “Ranboo can. But I can’t. He’ll feel everything you do to him.” He stepped forward again, raising the axe. “Keep that in mind.”

He lunged forward, swinging the blade toward Phil. The man ducked and propelled himself backwards, and the axe lodged in the wall instead. Dream yanked it free, turning to face Phil, who was backing up down the hallway toward the entrance of the mansion. As Dream approached him again, he felt Ranboo scratching to be free, but it was little more than an itch. A desperate, pitiful thing. It made his smile grow wider. This would be fun.

Phil backed up further. The smoke was beginning to fill the front hallway, covering the ceiling like dark storm clouds and churning in the air. Phil held the sword out in front of him like he was trying to tame a wild animal rather than kill it.

“Ranboo, I know you can hear me,” Phil begged. “I know you can fight it!”

“Your persistence with this is just annoying, Philza,” Dream groaned, rolling his eyes. “It’ll get you nowhere.” Dream lurched forward again, swinging his axe sideways toward Phil. Phil parried it, bringing his sword up and knocking it off course. Dream brought the butt of the axe back toward him, slamming it against his chest with enough force to send him staggering backwards. “If he could break free, he would have done it by now, don’t you think?”

“Let him go,” Phil demanded, and Dream barked out a laugh, adjusting the axe in his hand before swinging it down again. Phil jumped out of the way, using his wings to aid his speed. He threw himself backwards, through the entry door to the mansion and out into the open clearing in the forest.

“Or what? You’ll kill me? You’ll kill *him*? ” Dream shouted, following him outside. “I *dare* you to try. You’re a coward, Philza—” Dream swung down hard, and Phil got his sword up just in time to hold off the head of the axe, catching his blade under the edge. Dream narrowed his eyes, pressing down hard. “You know as well as I do that you couldn’t hurt a hair on this useless child’s head. You can’t kill him.” Dream leaned in. “But I can kill you.”

Phil grunted, heaving his sword upwards and throwing the axe off to the side. Dream kept his grip on it firm. Phil rolled out of the way a split second before Dream brought the head down, burying it in the ground where he knelt just a moment before.

“Monster,” Phil said. Dream took another swing, and once again, Phil dodged back. This was a tiresome game, slowly becoming less of an amusement and more of a chore.

“I wasn’t always,” Dream said, slowly approaching. “You have your *God* to blame for that,” he spat. “Your foolish, foolish God. I was *created*. ”

He swung again, and this time Philza wasn’t quite quick enough. The axe hit him hard in the chest, denting his armor and knocking the wind from his lungs. As it glanced off of his chestplate, it caught his arm, cutting through flesh. Blood began to fall from the wound. Phil beat his wings hard, launching himself back out of range. Dream smiled.

“You were banished to the void for a reason,” Phil said bitterly. “I’ve read the histories. You were evil in life, and you’re evil in death as well.”

“I think you’ll find I’m *far* from dead.” Dream ground his teeth and lunged.

Their weapons clashed, the sound of netherite on netherite ringing out into the clearing. Phil was on the defensive, ever on the move, dodging and ducking and rolling out of the way, throwing himself into the sky before landing out of range. He cast a worried look back at the mansion.

The whole right side was being slowly consumed by flames, smoke rising in the air. Phil could easily fly away, spare his own life, but his care for this vessel would be his downfall. Each swing bore down on him with all the strength that Dream could muster up from Ranboo’s body, a strength that lay hidden beneath that bony, frail guise. Hy was a hybrid, after all. Endermen were hardy, powerful despite their stature. Ranboo was no exception. He recalled snapping that boy Ilya’s arm like it was a twig.

His swing was strong, and each blow hit hard. Phil could hardly get his sword back up to parry, his movements too careful, too restrained. Dream could see him thinking, his face searching for any solution to this, anything to stop the fire, to stop Ranboo, to stop *him*.

“Why don’t you take a break, old man?” Dream teased. “You can perch up in the trees while Ranboo and I take a nice little stroll through the mansion.”

Fire crackled behind them. Soon enough, the whole thing would be engulfed. If there was truly a totem inside, it would be melted down to a puddle of gold, rendered useless. Blood dripped down Phil’s arm. There was a cut on his cheek where Dream had come close to cutting his head clean off, an act that had made Ranboo’s consciousness scream in protest. The sound just filled Dream with delight.

Phil circled him, positioning himself between Dream and the entrance to the mansion. He looked so pathetically determined. They were all the same, humans and hybrids alike, naively convinced that they could change their fate by pure power of will. It was amusing, at least. Pitiful, but amusing.

“Come on, Phil. We both know there’s one outcome here,” Dream said, shrugging his shoulders casually. “You’ll try your hardest not to harm your precious Ranboo, and I’ll try my hardest to kill you. And I’ll be the one to succeed.”

“You won’t,” Phil said, his jaw tight. Dream laughed.

“Prove me wrong,” he said. He let his face darken. “I’ll lodge this axe into your neck so deep you’ll still taste blood in the afterlife.” He felt Ranboo squirm, felt him claw at the corners of Dream’s control, like a child kicking and screaming. “And when you’re dead, I’ll walk straight into that fire.” Phil tightened his grip on his sword. “And when Ranboo pulls me from the Void, I’ll let him live just long enough to see your body with his own eyes, to see the blood on his hands, before I cut his throat as well.”

In his head, he felt Ranboo pleading with him, begging, telling Phil to *kill him, kill him or run, run far, please*, telling Dream *don’t make me do this, not again*. He fought and he screamed and he cried and it didn’t matter. That was the beauty of it. Dream had his claws in too deep.

“Oh, you should hear him,” Dream said, blinking slowly, savoring the fear he felt from Ranboo, the fear he felt from Phil. “Wouldn’t it just break your little old heart,” he tutted. He tilted his head back, grinning at the shiver Ranboo’s agony sent down his spine.

“He’s a *child*, ” Phil shouted.

“He’s a means to an end,” Dream shrugged.

“He had a family!” Phil lamented. “He *has* a family! Every person in this *world* has a family, a life, you’d just destroy all of them for what, revenge? Meaningless chaos?”

“Well, yeah. Who do you think I am?” Dream asked. He could see the way his indifference boiled Phil’s blood. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish here, Philza? You think you’re going to change my mind? Going to save the world by talking me to death?” It was laughable.

Phil furrowed his brow, readying his sword with a roll of his shoulder. To Dream's surprise, he ran forward, angling the blade down at first to catch the axe from underneath. He wrenched his arm up and out, pushing the blade out to the side before grabbing Ranboo's wrist. Dream brought his other hand around, aiming for the wound on Phil's shoulder, but before he had the chance to land a blow, he felt Phil's foot sweep out behind his knees and the next instant his back was slamming against the ground.

He was crafty, Dream would give him that. He seemed to have realized that if he couldn't injure Ranboo, he could pin him down. What his plan was after that, Dream didn't particularly care. Phil brought his sword around, straightening up as he held the blade at Ranboo's chin, letting it hover there. It was clear he had no power here. He couldn't even kill the thing that murdered his friend.

Dream smiled.

With Ranboo's left hand, Dream reached up, wrapping his palm around the sword's edge and holding it tight in his grip. The blade cut into his flesh. Blood seeped through his fingers and down his arm, and he sensed the sharp surge of pain Ranboo felt. Phil tensed as Dream began pulling the blade towards Ranboo's throat and leaning in, getting so far as to nick the underside of his chin before Phil yanked the sword back. As he did, it cut deeper, opening up the gashes in Ranboo's palm and fingers further. Thick purple drops fell to the ground.

Staggered backward, standing a distance away from him, and Dream pulled himself to his feet. He glanced down at the deep wounds on Ranboo's hand, one long cut on his palm and deep gashes on each of his fingers, deep enough Dream could see the white glint of bone as he stretched the hand open wider, splaying his fingers wide.

He could feel Ranboo shriek in protest, pain blossoming from the injury, but it was only numb to Dream. He smirked, clenching the hand into a tight fist so that blood ran in streams to the ground, pooling there in a puddle of iridescent purple.

"Couple more of those and this might start to get interesting," Dream said, looking up to meet Phil's gaze. The sword in his hand had streaks of Ranboo's blood on the blade. Phil looked just about ready to be sick at the sight. "I was just going to have Ranboo walk into the fire to

get him to teleport, but if you'd like to do the honors yourself then be my guest!" Dream held his arms out, an invitation.

Above them, the sky was slowly becoming darker, clouds casting shadows over the forest. Wind whistled through the trees around them, picking up leaves and debris as it did. Dream watched as Philza's wings ruffled, the feathers trembling in the gust of air.

"Why don't you spare yourself the trouble, Phil?" Dream called, lowering his arms. "Go fly away from here. Go find Technoblade back where you abandoned him. You can bury him while you're at it."

That got a reaction out of him. Phil flew at him, using his wing to block the swing of Dream's axe. The netherite blade cut straight through his feathers and lodged into the meat of the appendage. Phil spun, planting his knee into Ranboo's chest and knocking him to the ground again, but Dream wouldn't let him get pinned so easily this time. He pulled his legs up, planting his feet against Phil's torso and kicking up, launching the hybrid over his head and rolling to his feet. As he did, the sword was wrenched from Phil's hand, skittering to the side. Phil tumbled, trying to gain his balance again.

"Aren't you angry?" Dream shouted over the wind that whipped through the clearing, turning to face him. "Don't you blame him? It was his strike that killed your friend, his hand that struck the blow!"

"No," Phil said, shaking his head.

"Oh, be honest with yourself for once, you coward," Dream snapped. "You're trying to tell me that you'd look this boy in the eye and see anything other than the miserable creature that murdered your friend? Your *family*?" Dream scowled, stalking toward Phil. The man staggered back, nearly tripping over himself.

"It's not your fault, Ranboo," Phil said. Ranboo cried out to him from the corners of Dream's control, making Dream feel cold for just a moment before he faded back. "I don't blame you. It's *him*. It's that *thing*."

“You’re all the same, all of you,” Dream said, shaking his head. “Cowards and liars and *fools*.”

Phil’s wings opened up behind him, the dark catching the wind. Fire light highlighted the gleaming, smooth feathers. If Dream was anyone else, it might have looked intimidating.

“It wasn’t him,” Phil said. Dream felt a surge of emotion from Ranboo, some confusing wave of guilt and longing. It made him sick. “You made him.”

“My reach only goes so far,” Dream shrugged. “He was always capable of such violence. I just.. nudged him in the right direction.”

Thunder boomed overhead. In the sky above, bright white flashes of lightning traveled between the swirling purple clouds. It filled Dream with a chilling energy. Chaos was ever present in this world. It was inescapable, uncontained, surging through every crashing wave and wildfire and thunderstorm. This world had always been moments from collapse. All it needed was something to tip the scales.

“If you meet your god,” Dream said sweetly, “be sure to tell him I sent you.”

Dream began to walk forward, the axe heavy in his hand. With Phil disarmed, this fight would be over in seconds. Dream intended to savor it. Maybe he’d make Ranboo kill him with his bare hands, wrapped around his throat, watching the life drain from his eyes. Maybe he’d cut his throat and let Ranboo wake long enough to try to save him.

His plans were cut short by a dagger planting itself in the grass between Dream and Phil.

Dream recognized it. Ranboo did, too, a disgusting surge of hope coursing through his thoughts. Dream took a long, slow inhale. He turned to his left, where the dagger had been thrown from, and sighed.

“You,” he said, locking eyes with the grotesquely familiar piglin hybrid, “are getting on my last nerve.”

“The feelin’s mutual,” Technoblade grunted.

The whole left side of Technoblade’s body was drenched in blood. He’d removed his chest plate, leaving his undershirt clearly visible. There was a hole in the side where the dagger had entered his stomach, but now it wasn’t just torn fabric; it was burned around the edges, blackened and scorched. The skin underneath looked raw. A similar burn marred the skin around his neck, sealing together the axe wound that had once gushed with blood.

In his right hand, he held the trident. Dream regarded it with disdain. The power that emanate off of it made him shudder.

“You’re supposed to be *dead*, ” Dream hissed, his anger boiling.

“Sorry to disappoint,” Techno said in an infuriating monotone.

“How?” Dream demanded.

“Fire and saltpeter does a good job to stop bleedin’,” Techno said. He held his hand gingerly over the wound on his side. “Maybe you should have swung harder.”

“I’ll keep it in mind this time,” Dream growled. Techno was pale, wavering on his feet. If this were a normal fight, Dream could take him out in seconds. But the trident he held in his hand made him nauseous even to look at it. It was a disgusting relic, the leftover power of the God emanating from it in waves.

“Something wrong?” Techno asked, holding the trident out in front of him, the prongs facing toward Ranboo’s head. The thunder overhead grew louder, cracking like a whip through the air. “You’re scared of this thing, right?” Dream scowled. “I’d love to know why.”

“You couldn’t *dream* of channeling the power that weapon holds,” Dream snarled.

“Neither could you,” Techno said. “You can’t even get *near* it. That’s why you didn’t destroy it when you left, isn’t it?” Techno stepped forward, and a wave of electricity sparked through the air. The clouds above them churned, bright white light illuminating them in flashes of dark purple.

“If you strike him down, he’ll just teleport,” Dream said. “It’s just another danger, just like fire, just like water. It’ll force him through the Void like anything else.”

“Maybe,” Techno said, stepping forward again. “Maybe not.”

“Then it’ll kill him,” Dream warned. “You’d really risk that?” Dream could see Techno clench his jaw.

“Techno!” Phil called out over the howling wind. “Don’t! We– we can find another way–”

“If you let Ranboo kill you, the grief he’d feel would be worse than anything Dream can do to him,” Techno said, cutting him off. “If he dies like this, then he dies knowing he didn’t kill us himself.”

“Please,” Phil said. Dream didn’t even have to turn his head to know he was crying. How pitiful. How *selfish*. Even now, even with the fate of his world on the line, he couldn’t bring himself to think about anything but himself. Maybe the two of them were more alike than Dream thought.

“Ranboo,” Techno said softly. Dream felt Ranboo’s consciousness surge inside of him. “If there’s anythin’ left of you that can hear me, just– know that none of this is your fault.” Techno flipped the trident in his hand, holding it like a spear, like a hunter readying for a kill.

Dream grinned, feeling the power of the trident surge through the air as another crack of thunder sounded. It made the hair on Ranboo's neck stand up, made his skin tingle with electricity, with the power of the Totem God, now destined to be the thing that brought the world to chaos.

"Don't let it win," Techno said.

The lightning overhead traveled between the clouds in thunderous bursts that lit up the world in near continuous flashes of white. Dream could feel Ranboo clawing, fighting against him.

Enough.

Dream shuddered. The sentiment was more powerful than he expected. Techno raised the trident up slowly. The crackle overhead grew louder. He could feel the static grow stronger. It filled him with something he couldn't quite place, a feeling of tension, anticipation, excitement and fear mixing, something waiting to happen.

I won't let you.

Phil ran forward, sprinting toward Techno as fast as he could, his wings beating uselessly behind him. If his intention was to block the throw, he was unsuccessful, too slow to reach Techno before the trident left his fingertips, releasing in one swift motion.

The wind around them swirled, picking up so quickly that Ranboo's hair and clothes were whipped around in the rush of air.

We'll die here—

Philza stepped in front of Techno, turning his back to Dream and spreading his wings out behind him. He was protecting him.

Together.

And in those final moments, as the trident traveled toward them, a vessel and a puppeteer, as the bolt of lightning overhead began to reach its fingers down toward them, as the purple particles began to dance in front of their eyes and blind them with shifting light, Dream felt one final protest from Ranboo. One final attempt to take back control, to stop him, to return to himself.

It was slight, little more than a tug, a momentary lapse. It hardly made Dream waver at all, hardly made Ranboo's body tense, made him stiffen, made his fingers twitch. It was hardly enough to make the particles fade from his vision, to clear his sight, to root him to the earth like an ancient tree, to bind him to the dirt upon which he stood.

It was hardly enough. Hardly.

But it *was* enough.

To Dream's horror, it was enough.

Lightning bore down above them, Dream and Ranboo, together trapped in one mind. The power of the Totem God, embodied in pure energy.

Dream watched as Philza's wings surrounded Techno. He watched as the world filled with pure white light, blindingly brilliant, the crack of sound loud enough to hear from the Void.

The trident had found its mark, burying itself into Ranboo's chest.

Then Dream felt, for the first time in decades, pain.

Chapter End Notes

Woo! Chapter! Look at me go! Technoblade never dies! But uh, Ranboo might. I guess you'll have to wait and seeeeee... 0.0 God this chapter was so hard to write. Fight scenes are already terrible. This was like... 4k words of that. Hng. But I am SO excited for the next chapter... lots of feelings... :0

I'd love to know your theories. Tell me your thoughts. Yell at me. I love it. It fuels me. >:)

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

8/29 – oh my god the sheer number of you who mentioned that there wasnt an MCD tag has me absolutely cackling. iconic.

8/3 – ok so I had a decent amount written for the next chapter, and then I realized I hated it. So... starting from scratch unfortunately. I don't think itll be crazy delayed, but unless I'm Cracked at Writing, it probably won't be tomorrow unfortunately :(love yall, thanks for being patient

8/4 – hope yall like angst.

8/6 – rest assured i am still working on this chapter lol - im almost 6k words into it :0 gotta give it some oomph yanno

Petrichor

Chapter Summary

“So you... you remember all of it, then?” Techno asked.

“Every second,” Ranboo said quietly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Waking up felt cold.

It felt jarring, like plunging into ice water, like opening your eyes to find yourself mid free fall. Air found its way into Ranboo's lungs so forcefully it made him choke, and yet he still felt breathless, his inhales stuttering in his chest.

Everything burned. The grass under his arms and neck felt like needles, his skin prickled and stung like he was being pelted by hail. Even a whisper of wind on his face felt like whips across his cheeks.

His body felt frozen. He was rooted in place, his arms and legs and head held down as though by an invisible hand, pinning him to the ground. He felt dense and heavy, the very thought of movement exhausting to consider, nonetheless execute. Opening his eyes felt impossible, a mountain he couldn't hope to climb.

He felt pressure against his chest, a sharp, stabbing pain rocochetting through his bones. There was a voice, then a second, but his blood rushed in his ears too loud to make out the words.

Ranboo knew a heartbeat wasn't supposed to sound like this. It echoed inside him, keeping time about as well as a broken clock, ticking off tempo and catching on every third or fourth pass. Each time punched his breath from his lungs, made him desperate to cling to anything,

anything that would hold him in place, stop the ground underneath him from spinning, from falling away into void.

His fingers found something solid, something warm, and he clung to it as best he could despite the shockwaves it sent down his arm. He knew his grip was weak, but it didn't matter. It was something.

A deep rumble shook the earth, leaving behind a lingering burn of static in the air and bringing with it a new fear Ranboo had never felt before.

He needed it to stop. He needed to feel a full breath in his lungs, to open his eyes, to feel like there was ground beneath and sky above. This felt too nauseatingly familiar, a disorientation he'd known too well before, a feeling of being trapped so deep in his own mind he feared he'd never return.

The hand that had wrapped so carefully around his fingers shifted, making his heart jolt and ache at the movement, but nothing left his parted lips but a low gasp of air and a stifled warble.

"Do you think you could carry him?" One voice asked. It sounded a thousand miles away, and yet at the same time so close it made his head hurt. He recognized it. He knew he recognized it. Why was it such agony to think?

"What? Why?" The second asked. It sounded strained, confused. "I'm not leaving you here to—"

"It's going to start raining soon. He needs to be somewhere sheltered when it does." Thunder cracked through the air once again. Ranboo could see the stark flashes of light even with his eyes closed. "If you can take him, then I can search the mansion before it's a pile of ashes."

Memories began to trickle back slowly, leaking through the dam that barricaded his thoughts. A fire, a storm, a trident. Blood. His blood. Not his blood.

Ranboo forced out another croak, a noise produced at the far back of his throat. His eyes finally cracked open, just barely, just enough to see dark clouds swirling above him like waves in the sea, enough to see two silhouettes of figures knelt over him where he lay, enough to see smoke rising into the air from the grass around him. He couldn't hold his focus. Everything was blurry and distant, shapes with no edges, thoughts with no meaning.

“How far of a walk is that cave?”

A memory returned to him; a dagger, an axe, hot blood flowing over his hand, spraying against his face. Eyes that mourned, that wanted, that begged, a body that moved against his will. Words spoken softly; *fight it; it's okay; it's not your fault*. He tightened his grip on whatever it was he was holding and felt something return the favor, a squeeze against his hand.

But it was, wasn't it?

“Do you think it's okay to move him?”

“I don't think we have a choice.”

“Damn it.”

It all felt so familiar and yet so far. There was another boom of thunder and it was like his whole body flinched away from the sound. He felt a surge of fear, panic, a need to get away from the storm, from the whipping winds and flashes of lightning overhead. He couldn't do it again, not the feeling of being frozen, the million needles in his skin, the sound so loud that it might as well have been pure silence with how it blocked out everything else.

“It's alright,” one voice said, such a familiar voice. A voice he trusted. Why was this feeling so familiar? He hated it. “We've got you.”

“The cave,” the other voice insisted. “Could you make it that far?”

“Maybe. Probably. I’ll figure it out.”

“Just– will you be okay?”

“The wounds are sealed for now. Just help me lift him.”

Moving was agony. There were hands touching him, pulling him upright, maneuvering and adjusting and everything was burning white hot like his bones were leaking fire from the inside out.

He tried to focus on something else, anything else– the sway of footsteps, labored breathing, the voice that spoke to him softly, gently in between pants, words sweet but indecipherable past the waves of pain traveling through his body.

As they traveled, the feeling began to blissfully dull. It began in his fingertips; the wind no longer felt like needles, the fabric under his palms becoming soft again, textured, bearable. There was an ache in his left hand that throbbed in time with his heartbeat. Sensation began returning to his toes. When he opened his eyes, his vision shook, but he could make out grass and patches of clovers and wildflowers that were jostled by the wind.

He could see his arm, dangling down toward the ground. Blood was dried on the back of his hand and under his nails. Pinkish scars ran up the length of his arm, scars he didn’t recognize. They looked like tree branches, or like the ice that crept its way up the windows in the cabins after a particularly cold night.

They looked like lightning.

Looking down, he could see the grass pass by them, the legs that carried him. He was draped over someone’s shoulders. They smelled like ash and earth and smoke. And blood.

“Techno?” Ranboo asked before he had even processed the thought. His voice sounded foreign, broken. Speaking felt strange and unpracticed. His voice was his own again. It almost didn’t feel true.

“Yeah,” Techno said softly. Ranboo could feel the vibration of the word in his chest.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo said. He felt tears pricking at his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Techno said.

“Is... is Phil...?”

“He’s searching the mansion,” Techno said simply. “Before it burns down.” Ranboo felt guilt twist in his stomach like a knife.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“It’s okay,” Techno repeated.

Ranboo shook his head against Techno’s shoulder. Moving felt foreign, too, strangely sharp, crisp, like everything that had come before had been muddled. After so long, he held his own strings again.

“I *killed* you,” Ranboo murmured against his shirt.

“Pretty sure I’m still alive,” Techno said. He adjusted his grip on Ranboo, one hand on the bend of his knee and the other on his arm. The jolt made Ranboo inhale sharply. “Sorry,” Techno murmured.

The apology broke the dam. Ranboo buried his head further against Techno's shoulder, hot tears making the fabric under his face damp. It burned, but so did everything, just another ache to add to the mess he had become. Techno remained silent, his pace steady. Ranboo knew they couldn't afford to waste time. He was already beginning to hear the patter of rain on the forest canopy above them, an occasional drop seeping through and falling onto the ground around them or his skin. He wished he could stand and walk, to take the weight off of Techno's shoulders, to carry himself for once.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but eventually Techno slowed to a stop. They were now sheltered from the wind that had buffeted them, and Ranboo realized how much it had made his skin burn.

"I gotta set you down," Techno said.

Ranboo did his best to nod. Techno knelt with a groan and Ranboo winced, not at his own discomfort but at the pain he knew Techno felt in the action. He knew he was injured. Ranboo had inflicted those injuries. He'd caused this.

Techno propped him up against the solid wall of the cave. The cold stone felt surprisingly good against his back, and he leaned into it, letting his head rest and his body relax slightly.

For how short of a time they had spent in this cave when Phil had left to go explore the mansion, the memory of it was shockingly clear. He could still see the dagger in his hand, feel the way it had slid so easily into Techno's flesh, right in the crook of his armor. He could feel the weight of the axe in his hand. And even though his eyes shook, scarcely open, he could still make out the dark puddle of red that remained on the patchy dirt floor of the inlet where he'd left Techno dead.

Or, not dead. He wasn't dead. He was knelt down, now, next to Ranboo, sliding Ranboo's arm off from around his shoulders. Ranboo couldn't help but stare at him, at his face, at the pink hued skin that was taut over his cheekbones, the hump of his nose, the rusty reddish brown of his eyes. Techno stared back at him, blinking slowly. He looked exhausted, his skin ashy and paler than its usual warm tone, but he was still all there, still held together, still flesh and blood.

He was still alive.

“I forgot you burn when you cry,” Techno noted quietly, his voice hardly audible. “This is you I’m speakin’ to, right? The real you?” Ranboo’s stomach twisted, his chest tightening. “I don’t think I can take much more of that Dream guy,” Techno chuckled half-heartedly.

“It’s me,” Ranboo murmured. Techno continued to stare at him, into his eyes despite how they shook, despite how Ranboo couldn’t hold his gaze even if he tried. Ranboo couldn’t tell if Techno believed him. There was nothing he could do to prove it. Dream had stolen his voice before, reassured them that it was him, that he was okay, a perfect lie.

They shared the same head, after all. The same memory. They were the same.

Now, though, Dream was quiet. His presence felt weak, distant, tucked away in some dark corner just as Ranboo had been tucked away before.

“Is it... can you still hear it? Is he still in there?” Techno asked. The hope in his voice made Ranboo’s chest tighten. He nodded.

“He’s weak,” Ranboo said solemnly, “But he’s still there.” Techno sighed, letting his legs settle in front of him and sitting down on the ground. He rested one hand behind him, propping him up, the other placed carefully in his lap. “I’m sorry,” Ranboo said.

“I know,” Techno replied. “I know you are.”

“I killed you,” Ranboo said. His voice cracked again, but he had no tears left to cry. His eyes burned nonetheless. Techno shook his head.

“I’m right here,” he said.

“I thought you were dead, I really thought– I couldn’t fight it, I was trying so *hard*, I swear, I–”

“I know, Ranboo,” Techno said softly. “I know. I believe you. It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was,” Ranboo insisted, his breath hitching in his chest.

“No,” Techno said simply.

“How can you say that?” Ranboo asked, finally forcing himself to look Techno in the eye. “How can you even look at me right now?” Techno shrugged. His nonchalance was baffling. It left Ranboo speechless.

“I’ve had worse betrayals,” Techno said. “From people who were well within their right mind, too. This...” Techno sighed, shaking his head and leaning back. “You gotta see the bigger picture here, I guess.”

Ranboo just blinked at him. He couldn’t fathom it, how Techno could even bear to be in the same space as him, to breathe the same air, after he’d... it didn’t make sense. After a long silence, Techno spoke.

“I thought I killed you, too.” His voice was low. He sounded almost guilty.

“What?”

“With the trident,” Techno said, rubbing his temple with one hand. He winced at the movement. “I didn’t... I didn’t know what it would do. I mean, I could guess. And when it... when you... *god*,” Techno muttered, shaking his head.

He looked down at his lap, taking a breath. Ranboo had never seen him so shaken up. Even after the incident with Ilya in the east village. He picked at the skin around his fingernails, chipping away at the dried blood there.

“I’ve never seen lightning strike someone, ya know?” Techno sighed, his shoulders dropping.

“Guess it’s not very common,” Ranboo said, and Techno breathed out a laugh.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “I didn’t even see it hit. Phil jumped in front of me, and then when he moved, you were just layin’ there, smoke comin’ off of you... and you weren’t breathing.” Ranboo swallowed thickly. He recalled the smell of burning. “Phil looked at me like... well, like I’d killed his son.” Techno shook his head. “Don’t know if he’ll forgive me for that one.”

Ranboo remembered how Phil had looked at him while they fought, his expression so sorrowful, so full of anger and sadness and rage and confusion. Ranboo remembered how he’d begged for him to listen, to fight it, how he let him down so many times. Nothing he did was enough to pull himself back from Dream’s shadow. With all his strength, all his willpower, the most he could do was make the thing hesitate.

“Thank you,” Ranboo said quietly. “I think...” he paused, his stomach turning. “I think Dream would have killed him. I don’t think I could have stopped him. I wasn’t strong enough.”

“You were in the end,” Techno said. “Dream said you’d teleport, but you didn’t. I saw the particles for a second, but then they disappeared. And you looked like... you. Your eyes changed. Just for a second.”

“It wasn’t enough to save you,” Ranboo said, shaking his head.

“Ranboo, I’m *saved*. I’m right here,” Techno insisted. “Flesh and blood, see?”

“But—”

“Speaking of which, we should probably get you patched up,” Techno said, pushing himself to his feet with a groan.

“Techno–”

“That trident didn’t go too deep, but who knows what kinda ancient rust was on it.” Techno knelt down gingerly next to his backpack which was propped up against the opposite wall, digging through it until he found a shimmering glass bottle and a small tin of salve. “And that cut on your hand worries me. Phil’s sword did that, yeah?”

“W– yes, but–”

“Netherite makes a hell of a blade–”

“Techno, *stop!*” Ranboo shouted. He didn’t remember rising to his feet, but he was standing now, looking down at Techno. His knees were shaking, hardly holding him up. His fists were clenched, his left hand throbbing in time to his heartbeat. Techno stared at him blankly. Ranboo felt himself tremble, a lump rising in his throat. “You’re bleeding,” he said, his voice cracking.

Techno looked down to find Ranboo was right. There was a new wet spot on his shirt, a few drops of blood falling from the wound and onto the ground. There was silence between them, punctuated by the thundering rain outside the mouth of the cave.

“Oh,” Techno said quietly.

Ranboo’s lip trembled. His knees buckled, taking him to the ground with a thud, and he sat back on his heels with his hands in his lap. Techno walked to him slowly, kneeling in front of him, and Ranboo leaned forward, wrapping his arms carefully around his waist and tucking his head into the man’s chest. Techno carded one hand gently through Ranboo’s hair.

“I’m alright,” Techno said. “We’re both alright.”

“I thought you were dead,” Ranboo sobbed. Each breath felt like knives.

“Yeah, I know. Me too.” Techno held him close.

Ranboo didn’t know if he meant that he thought he himself had died as well, or if he thought Ranboo had died, but he supposed it didn’t matter. He numbly recalled a similar moment they’d shared on the walk home from the east village, how Techno had asked him to stay despite it all, how he’d held him, how he’d shown him trust.

Eventually, Ranboo got ahold of himself, getting his breathing under control enough for the stars that danced in his vision to fade. Techno patted him gently on the shoulder, and Ranboo hummed in response.

“Come sit over here,” Techno said. “I wasn’t lyin’ about being worried. That trident was nasty.” Ranboo smiled slightly and nodded, letting Techno help him to his feet and get him situated again. He pulled his shirt up over his head and set it down beside him, his muscles protesting the movement, and looked down at his chest.

There were three wide gashes over his ribcage, purple trails of blood dried underneath them where the trident had struck him dead on. Techno had good aim. Ranboo supposed that was lucky for them, in the end.

Along with the trident wounds, there were scars running across his skin that matched the marks on his arms, latticed feathery marks that appeared pink on his right side and pale purple on his left. Techno blew out a soft breath at the sight.

“Guess that’s what lightning leaves behind, huh?” He said. Ranboo said nothing, blinking as he looked away from the marks on his skin. “How do you feel?” Techno asked.

“Tingly,” Ranboo said.

“Not gonna keel over on me?”

“I hope not,” Ranboo sighed. Techno smirked, pouring some of the shimmering liquid from the glass bottle out onto a rag before wiping at Ranboo’s chest with it. It stung, and Ranboo winced, but if Techno noticed he didn’t say anything. “Do you think Phil’s okay?” Ranboo asked. Techno nodded.

“He’s fine,” he said with such confidence that Ranboo almost believed it as fact. “He’ll be back before you know it.” Techno gingerly prodded at the leftmost cut on Ranboo’s chest, dislodging a sharp, pale blue shard from the skin there.

“Is that...?”

“A piece of the trident,” Techno sighed. “The thing shattered when it hit you. Lucky it didn’t fall apart in my hand before I got the chance to throw it.”

“Oh,” Ranboo mumbled.

“Let me see your hand,” Techno said gently.

Ranboo held his palm out. His fingers were curled up, and when he tried to unfold them, they refused to budge. Techno ran his thumb underneath his fingertips, pushing the digits back carefully, and the movement sent a shock of pain down his arm so strong it made his stomach flip. He flinched hard. It took every bit of restraint not to pull his hand back.

“Sorry,” Techno said. He tilted his head, inspecting the hand as best he could. “Can you move the fingers at all?”

Ranboo almost didn’t even want to try, wary of the pain it would cause him, but he took a breath and tried to open his hand up. His first two fingers twitched, moving just slightly. It made him grind his teeth.

“That’s it?” Techno asked. Ranboo nodded. “Okay. I’m gonna pour some of this on it and we’ll wait a minute for it to numb up,” Techno said. “Might sting,” he added before dumping out some of the potion onto Ranboo’s palm before Ranboo had a chance to question it.

He was right, of course; it stung.

Techno tucked the soft rag against Ranboo’s palm and under his bent fingers, letting it staunch the blood that still dripped sluggishly from the wounds on his hand. Ranboo winced, but Techno moved with cautious precision so as not to jostle him too much. There was a flash outside the mouth of the cave, the bright white light banishing the shadows of the cave for just a brief moment before the thunder came.

Ranboo watched the storm outside with trepidation. Rain already gave him ample reason to fear. Now he had a new wariness to add onto that. At the very least, he knew there was rarely thunder in the tundra. He longed to be back there now, to be home, to be curled up in front of the fire before any of this was even a whisper of a threat in his mind.

“So you... you remember all of it, then?” Techno asked.

“Every second,” Ranboo said quietly. Techno nodded, humming, before leaning back slightly.

“Ranboo, when...” Techno began, but paused, furrowing his brow. He didn’t look up at Ranboo, instead focusing his efforts on tucking the corner of the cloth neatly under Ranboo’s pointer finger. “When did Dream—” he sighed, trying to find the right way to phrase what he wanted to ask. “How long was he in control?”

Ranboo swallowed. It was a question he knew was coming, but one he wished more than anything Techno hadn’t thought to ask. He kept his eyes trained down, blinking slowly, but he couldn’t come up with a response that felt right.

“Ranboo?” Techno prompted. Ranboo let out a breath, trying his best to keep it even.

“It... I don’t know,” Ranboo said, a lie. He knew Techno wouldn’t believe it. Dream may have been good at lying in his stead, but Ranboo knew there was very little he could hide.

“Well, when’s the last time you remember being... in control?” Techno asked. Ranboo bit the inside of his cheek. “Ranboo, why don’t you want to tell me?” Techno asked, his voice becoming more worried.

“It doesn’t matter, just– please,” Ranboo said. He wasn’t sure what he was asking for; maybe for Techno to drop it, maybe for him to forget, maybe to realize on his own so Ranboo didn’t have to say it.

“You’re makin’ me nervous, here, kid,” Techno said. “Just– what? How long?”

“Techno–” Ranboo started, but Techno cut him off.

“Ranboo, how long?” Techno asked again, this time more desperate. Ranboo could see the realization dawning on him, that this wasn’t just a short lapse of mind. He felt sick. “In the stronghold? Were you in control then?” Ranboo pressed the palm of his uninjured hand against his eye, shaking his head. “What... what about in the village?”

Ranboo could remember their arrival so clearly, seeing the bones of villagers and children, the golem that was coated in blood. He could remember the shock he felt seeing it, the way it made his thoughts shudder to a halt. And he could remember how Dream had pushed his body on despite it, forcing him ever onwards. Dream had regarded the village with pride. It made Ranboo sick.

“How long?” Techno asked again. Outside, another crack of thunder sounded through the air.

If he knew, he’d blame himself. Ranboo knew he would. No matter what he said, he’d place it all on his own shoulders, and there was nothing Ranboo was more desperate to avoid. But Ranboo stared at him with such desperation in his eyes that Ranboo knew he couldn’t avoid it. Techno always needed to *know*, even if it would hurt more. Knowing only made it worse.

Ranboo let out a shaky breath, swallowing hard.

“Do you... do you remember the night before we left?”

“Before we left the stronghold?” Techno asked, and Ranboo shook his head.

“Before we left *home*,” Ranboo said quietly. Techno was silent. Even without looking at his face, Ranboo could only guess he was beginning to understand. “We were... we were talking about our plan, about how we’d retrace my steps through the nether. And the memory book was on the table, and I— I looked. I didn’t even realize I was looking.”

“But I closed it,” Techno said. “You hardly even... I closed it before you could—” Ranboo shook his head.

“I saw enough,” Ranboo said.

“It wasn’t even a *second*—”

“That’s all it took,” Ranboo said, his voice scarcely audible. He felt frozen in place, unable to pull his gaze up from its focus on his hands in his lap, unable to look Techno in the eye, to say anything. Techno balled his hands up into fists, his knuckles going pale with how tense he’d become, his breath becoming strained.

“This whole time?” Techno asked. He sounded angry. Ranboo flinched, his ears pinning back, and Techno stood abruptly, pacing away from Ranboo. Ranboo looked up cautiously, watching him as he walked aimlessly around the small cave. He looked out at the clearing, at the rain that pounded down against the grass there, before pressing his palms against his eyes. “This whole time?” He asked again, disbelief coating his voice.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo said. Techno reacted as though Ranboo had personally punched the air from his lungs. He doubled over, bracing his hands against his knees. “Techno—”

“Don’t,” Techno said, the word strained. Ranboo realized he’d never seen Techno cry. He thought he might, now. Techno’s face was scrunched up, his shoulders shaking. “Please don’t say you’re sorry,” Techno said. His voice was almost too quiet to hear over the storm. “It’s not your fault, it’s not...”

Ranboo watched, waiting in silence. He didn’t know what else to say. It was such a cruel irony that after a whole lifetime forgotten, he’d have to remember this so clearly.

Things were blurry only at the start; right after he’d seen the book, after Techno had closed it, he recalled feeling cold. He had been numb, then, not quite out of his own body yet. It had felt like a dream, like moving through water. The feeling didn’t last long. Instead, it had been replaced by the realization that he was no longer the one piloting this body.

Each breath Dream breathed for him made his skin crawl. Each word Dream uttered from his lips was like blood on his tongue. He fought against it every second, kicked and screamed, clawed at the walls of his prison, and each time Dream opened his mouth to speak he begged to be heard, to be free.

He had been foolish enough to let his guard down in the first place, and for that he felt shame.

But Ranboo hated the way he felt angry, too. The way he felt betrayed. He knew, better than Techno, better than Phil, that Dream was more cunning and more powerful than any of them. That he was a better liar. That he was a manipulator of minds. He knew that when Dream took him over, his mimicry of Ranboo was even more exact than looking in a mirror. They shared a memory. They shared a mind.

Dream was only discovered in the end because he *wanted* to be discovered.

But despite that, Ranboo couldn’t help but feel betrayed. Each time Techno would ask if Ranboo was alright, he screamed from the corners of his own mind to be heard. Each time Phil asked about Dream, Ranboo fought to be free. How could they not hear? How could they not see?

Dream had used Ranboo's anger just as much as he'd used Ranboo's fear. It made him stronger. In the end, Ranboo had been devoid of anything other than a desire to be free, a determination to reclaim his mind. He wondered if it was the absence of that fear and anger and guilt that finally allowed him a moment of solace when it mattered.

The anger had come and gone, now, burnt through. He was tired of being angry. He was tired of being afraid. He wanted to be safe.

"I was supposed to protect you," Techno said, finally turning back to Ranboo.

"You did," Ranboo said. "You tried."

"It wasn't enough—"

"It was. You're alive. Phil is alive." Ranboo looked down at his hand. The parts of the rag that stuck out between his fingers were becoming stained purple. "I'm alive," he said quietly. It was beginning to feel true.

Techno shook his head, leaning one hand against the wall nearest to him. He looked on the outside how Ranboo felt on the inside. He could practically see Techno's thoughts reeling, his usual stoicism now cracking under the pressure of fatigue and revelation.

There was another flash of lightning outside, but it wasn't on top of them anymore. The thunder that followed seemed more distant.

"Come sit with me?" Ranboo asked. Techno looked up, his eyes tired, but his expression softened when he met Ranboo's gaze. "Please?"

Techno sighed, the tension leaving his shoulders. He let his hand slide from the wall next to him and made his way back over to Ranboo, his boots scuffing against the ground as he did.

When he got back to the wall Ranboo was leaning up against, he threw himself down with such little care it made Ranboo wince on his behalf. Techno let his head fall back against the cold stone wall and breathed out, his exhale shaky but controlled.

“I’m sorry,” Techno said. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Ranboo murmured.

“It’s not,” Techno shook his head. “None of this is okay.” Ranboo couldn’t argue with that. He hummed in response, a quiet agreement. “I– how did we not–?” Techno struggled to find the words.

“Dream knows everything *I* know,” Ranboo said, shaking his head.

“We played right into his hand, then,” Techno muttered. “The whole time, through the Nether, through the village... why would it lead us here?”

“He wanted to destroy the totem. It... it’s a remnant of what destroyed him the first time,” Ranboo said.

“So it could destroy him again?” Techno asked.

“I don’t know,” Ranboo said, shaking his head. “I don’t think Dream knows either.” Techno nodded silently. Ranboo looked out at the rain outside, still pattering against the ground. “What if Phil can’t find one?” He asked quietly. “A totem.”

Techno opened his mouth, perhaps to reassure him, to tell him it would be okay, but no words came out. Blind reassurance was useless, now. After everything they’d learned, nothing was certain.

“I can’t do this forever,” Ranboo muttered, looking away from the mouth of the cave and back down at his hands in his lap.

“I know,” Techno said. “One step at a time. Phil will be back soon.”

Ranboo sighed, nodding slightly.

“Ranboo, was... was any of it... you?” Techno asked slowly. Ranboo turned to look at him. Before he could answer, Techno interrupted, clarifying. “Not the, um. Not trying to kill me. Or the mansion. I know you would have stopped it if you could, but I mean, in the Nether.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. He thought back to their trip through the scorched landscape, furrowing his brow. “I... I don’t know. Some of it felt like... like sleepwalking. Like, if I didn’t think about it hard enough, it could have been a dream. It didn’t feel real, but... I think maybe I was— maybe Dream was letting me speak.” Ranboo looked back down. “Maybe to make it more believable.”

“What about—” Techno cut himself off, turning to look at Ranboo for a moment before looking back out at the storm outside. “What about when you had that nightmare?” He asked. “When you woke up that night, and you... you said Dream was there.”

Ranboo swallowed thickly.

“Was that... was that you?” Techno asked. Ranboo sighed, letting his shoulders sag.

“Yeah,” he said simply. Techno nodded silently, but Ranboo could see the way the confession shook him to his core.

Ranboo wished, bizarrely, that for once his poor memory would have worked with him rather than against him this time. He wished he could have forgotten all of it, to wake up with no memory of their trip or of Dream’s puppeteering, of his failures to regain control.

At the time, he'd believed he'd done it. He truly thought he'd managed to claw his way back, that he'd woken up as himself. Dream had taunted him. Told him, *try. Try to tell him. Go on* . So Ranboo did.

You don't understand, Ranboo had said. *It won't let me go*, Ranboo had said. *It's trying to pull me back*.

It didn't matter. Dream knew it didn't matter, that Techno would think it was just a nightmare, that he'd reassure him, *you're awake*, that he wouldn't understand in time before Dream took him back.

"You trusted me," Techno said. "You trusted me, and I—" he pressed his palms into his eye sockets. Ranboo wondered if he was crying. He wondered if Techno would let Ranboo see him cry. He wondered if Techno would let himself cry. "I was supposed to keep you safe," Techno said. "You trusted me."

"I still trust you," Ranboo said. "That's what got me through it. I knew you'd... you would find a way. And if you couldn't, you would do what had to be done." Techno didn't move. Ranboo wiped at his eyes, leaning over slightly so his weight was resting gently against Techno's shoulder. "If I didn't have faith in you and Phil, I think I would have gone mad," Ranboo murmured. "Like Karl." Ranboo swallowed, exhaling slowly. "Phil said it himself, in the stronghold. It's different. I've got you two. Remember?"

Techno breathed a laugh at that.

"*Remember*," he said quietly. "S'my job to ask *you* that." Ranboo smiled tiredly. "I remember." There was a pause between them. The rain outside wasn't torrential anymore, slowing to a dull patter against the leaves in the treetop and the dirt of the clearing. After a moment, Ranboo decided to ask Techno what had been lingering on his mind ever since Dream had forced his hand to light the mansion on fire.

"Techno," he said, and Techno hummed in response. "If... if Phil can't find a totem... or if it doesn't work, or— if we can't fix this. Promise me you won't hesitate again."

Techno turned his head to look at Ranboo where his head rested on the man's shoulder, but Ranboo couldn't look at him. He didn't want to know what his expression said. Ranboo waited for him to answer, but he remained quiet, lost for words once again.

"I know you did, before. After I... after Dream stabbed you, you could have defended yourself. You could have fought back, right then, but you didn't." Techno said nothing. Ranboo was surprised at how even his own voice was, now, how calm. "I guess you... you had a plan. Or you thought you did. But you can't... Dream was counting on it, that you and Phil wouldn't want to hurt me. So next time— if there's a next time," he said, trying to be as optimistic as he could, "you can't hesitate."

Ranboo felt the rise and fall of Techno's chest, his shoulder moving as he breathed, as he considered Ranboo's request.

"Please," Ranboo asked gently. "Promise me."

Finally, Techno sighed, nodding.

"I promise," he lied.

Ranboo closed his eyes, and Techno reached up, running a hand through Ranboo's hair.

"How do you feel?" Techno asked.

"Tingly," Ranboo replied.

"Still?" Ranboo nodded. "Wonder how long that'll last," Techno mused.

"Dunno. Never been struck by lightning before," Ranboo shrugged, and Techno chuckled.

“Is Dream still... quiet?” Techno asked carefully, and Ranboo nodded again.

“I can feel him, though,” Ranboo said. “It’s like... it’s like there’s cotton in my head where he was. Where he is.”

“Hm,” Techno hummed. “Kinda wished that lightning strike would’ve done him in, ya know?”

“Yeah,” Ranboo sighed. “You know, I don’t... I don’t think I remember what it was like to just be alone in here,” he admitted. “For it to be just... just me.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Techno said softly. “I used to, um...” Techno began, but he paused like he was considering if he wanted to finish the thought. “I used to hear voices,” he confessed. Ranboo opened his eyes, blinking at Techno in disbelief.

“What?” Ranboo asked, the only question he could muster.

“Yeah,” Techno said simply. “Do you... do you remember what I told you about piglins, how look out for their own, but only when they look like family?” Ranboo nodded. “When I stopped looking like them, they turned on me. It was like they’d never known me, like... like they hadn’t raised me my whole life. I tried to run, but they– they weren’t going to let me out of there alive,” Techno said. His voice sounded heavy. “So I fought my way out,” said. “I killed them all.”

Ranboo didn’t know what to say. He didn’t think there was anything *to* say. Techno had mentioned his childhood while they were traveling in the Nether. He’d said he was around Ranboo’s age when he left.

“Afterwards, I’d hear them. No matter where I went, like they were screaming at me. I thought I was being haunted. The only thing that made it stop was hunting. I killed anything I could just– just for it to be *quiet*.” Techno sighed. “The piglins call me *the Blood God*, you know. That’s my legacy,” he scoffed.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo said quietly. He looked away from Techno, looking back out to the storm. “That’s awful.”

“It was a long time ago,” Techno shrugged with one shoulder.

“It’s still awful,” Ranboo said. “No one deserves to go through that.”

“I used to wish sometimes that I hadn’t done it,” Techno admitted. “That I’d just let them...” he trailed off, but then shook his head. “But then I met Phil, and... and you. I’m glad I stayed alive long enough to be happy.”

Guilt twisted in Ranboo’s stomach, muddling with anger. Dream aimed to destroy that.

Ranboo wondered absentmindedly, if Dream had known love in his lifetime, if he’d known happiness, would he still be so hell bent on destruction?

“I’m glad you stayed alive, too,” Ranboo said. Techno smiled.

“I meant to tell you all that sooner, honestly,” he said. “You deserved to know, but I thought you’d... I don’t know. I thought you’d look at me different.”

“Techno, I have a literal being of pure chaos possessing my mind,” Ranboo said.

“But that’s not your fault,” Techno said dismissively.

“Neither was what happened to you,” Ranboo said gently.

“Yeah, well...” Techno said sheepishly. “I know it’s not the same. But I think we’ll find you that quiet eventually.”

“One way or another,” Ranboo murmured.

“One way or another,” Techno agreed solemnly.

Over the light patter of the rain, Ranboo began to hear footsteps, his ears twitching at the sound. Before he could even think, his body was moving for him, pulling him to his feet in a scramble of limbs. Techno rose too, slowly, the two of them staring expectantly out of the mouth of the cave.

The footsteps grew closer, a sharp anticipation growing in the pit of Ranboo’s stomach, until Phil stepped into view at the entrance to the inlet.

He was soaked, water dripping from his clothes and hair, down his face, his boots squelching as he walked. His wings dripped as well, but the water traveled down his feathers in pinkish streams and dark, ashy trails. They were held slightly outstretched, not tucked like Phil usually kept them. Where there were once long, thick feathers, the ends were now short, scorched off and blackened. Ranboo’s stomach lurched at the sight.

His mouth was slightly open with exhaustion, his eyes tired. In one hand, Phil held his sword, the tip dragging against the ground and leaving a thin trail in the mud behind him. In the other, he held a gold pendant.

The chain was thick, slightly tarnished, held firmly in Phil’s grip. At the end of the chain was a small gold-cast object, a statuette of a man with outstretched wings and emerald eyes.

It was a totem. Ranboo knew as soon as he laid eyes on it. Dream knew, too. He could feel it protest, beginning to claw at Ranboo’s mind the same way Ranboo had clawed to be in control so recently. But Dream was weak, now. Dream was weak, and Phil was standing before Ranboo now, burnt and battered and alive.

Ranboo stepped forward, one foot in front of the other. His body was still his own. He took another step, feeling the cold chill of Dream's grasp as little more than an echo. Then he stumbled forward, ignoring how his muscles ached, how his skin still stung.

Phil smiled tiredly, holding out the pendant for Ranboo to take, but it could wait. He pushed Phil's hand aside and wrapped his arms around the man's chest, hugging him so close he could feel Phil's heartbeat.

As soon as he did, he felt a warmth spread through him, a calm like he hadn't felt in... he couldn't remember how long. The chill left his bones, the clawing ceased, the feeling of being watched, being hunted, slowly dissipating.

Phil let out a soft grunt of surprise, frozen for a moment, but then he dropped the sword to the ground with a clatter before returning the embrace and placing his hands gingerly against Ranboo's back.

Ranboo closed his eyes, breathing in and out slowly. Phil smelled like fire and smoke and burning, the same smell that clung to Ranboo's clothes after the fire in the kitchen. It felt like so long ago.

"Hey, mate," Phil breathed softly. Ranboo opened his mouth to answer, but instead all that he could muster was a mournful warble. His breath hitched, and his eyes stung. He hadn't even noticed he'd started crying again.

He half expected to hear Dream's voice degrading him again, *pathetic*, or *coward*, but there was nothing.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo mumbled, his face pressed against the top of Phil's head.

"You're alright," Phil said gently, not an ounce of resentment in his voice. It made Ranboo cry harder. "Hey, it's okay. Breathe."

Ranboo took a shaky breath in, hiccuping as he did. Phil brought his hand up to Ranboo's shoulder, pushing him back slightly. Ranboo wanted to resist, to pull him closer and never let go, but he let himself step back. He looked at Phil with blurry eyes, but even with tears clouding his vision, he could still see that familiar soft smile the man wore.

"Here," Phil said. "Put this on." He held the chain of the pendant in each hand, reaching up to place it over Ranboo's head. Ranboo ducked slightly, bending forward and closing his eyes. He felt the chain slip over his head, flicking past his ears, until it settled heavy around his neck.

It felt warm, alive, humming with an energy Ranboo couldn't place but one that seemed to clear his head in an instant, that pushed fresh air into his lungs. He felt whole. He felt more than whole. Phil pressed the totem against his chest, and he felt *safe*.

Ranboo looked up, staring into Phil's eyes. The feeling felt so refreshing. Phil reached up, cupping his hand against Ranboo's face. He ran his thumb over the skin of Ranboo's cheek. His eyes were curious, concerned, and Ranboo nodded in a silent answer to an unspoken question. Phil let out a breath, his shoulders sagging, and he pulled Ranboo back into his arms.

"I thought I'd lost you," Phil said quietly, his voice muffled. Ranboo swallowed against the lump in his throat.

Ranboo clung to him tighter. He'd never felt so weightless. If he let go, he feared he'd float away into nothing. So he held on.

Chapter End Notes

ahaha,,,, how we feelin out there tonight,,,,?

told you it would be angst. tell me your emotions, i much desire to know. your interaction fuels me. it gives me power. power to do Evil >:) but also to make these boys hug each other for once in a blue moon <3

I will leave you with this ominous message; it's not over yet ;)

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

9/12 – just starting work on this next chapter! My aim is to have it out by next sunday at the absolute latest. I know that's a bit longer than usual, but I'm starting a job so my schedule is a bit thrown off, so thanks for being patient <3

9/14 – just realized this fic hit 70k hits :) once again, i am BAMBOOZLED by the support from yall, ur all amazing and im so glad ur enjoying my writing :))))))

9/16 – oh my GOD okay i finally got off my ass and im actually making progress on this chapter. in other news, grad school is hard. ta ta for now.

9/19 – ok SO i'm still writing the chapter, don't think I'll have it done tonight BUT i think it'll be out tomorrow! thanks for ur patience loves, much appreciated :)

Fallout

Chapter Summary

“I’m angry at him,” Ranboo continued. Phil shared a glance with Techno, but neither of them said anything. “Isn’t that awful?”

“At Dream?” Techno asked. “I don’t really blame you—”

“No,” Ranboo said, cutting him short. “At Karl,” he said softly, and smiled.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It seemed to Phil that Ranboo’s inability to cry without burning his skin was some kind of cosmic joke, or an unfortunate oversight. It felt like overkill. It felt like, considering everything the boy was going through, everything he’d been through, everything he’d seen and done and been forced to do, the very least this world could allow him to do was cry.

There was nothing fair about this, though. So perhaps it was fitting.

Phil and Techno could only watch as Ranboo wandered along the village paths, his eyes lingering on each body he saw. He carried himself cautiously, coiled like a spring, his arms close to his chest like he’d shatter if he let the tension leave him. His hands clutched the totem around his neck.

When they returned from their journey to the mansion, Phil had suggested going straight to the stronghold. They could find ingredients in Karl’s abandoned stores to make potions and salves to help heal their wounds, rest in a place safe from mobs, cook a good meal. But as they drew closer to their destination after three long days of slow, careful travel, Ranboo had insisted on going to the village first.

“I need to see it myself,” he had said. “With my own eyes.”

Phil hadn't the heart to say no.

So they returned to the scene of Dream's massacre, and Ranboo took it all in a second time. Phil wondered what it had been like seeing it before. He wondered what it felt like to be hidden away, caged in his own mind. He wondered if it was like being paralyzed, or maybe if it was like existing in a void watching on. He didn't dare ask. Ranboo seemed to want to offer very little about that experience.

When Phil had returned from the mansion, totem in hand, Ranboo had run to him like it was the first time he'd seen him in years. At the time, Phil thought it was purely out of relief at seeing him alive, out of guilt for what Dream made him do. He held him tight, let him cry as much as he needed to until he finally fell asleep, and Phil laid him down, placed his cloak over his shoulders, watched the rise and fall of his chest.

He felt like if he looked away, it would stop, and he'd lose him all over again.

"Are your wings going to be alright?" Techno had asked after Ranboo had fallen asleep, breaking the silence in the cave.

"Looks worse than it is," Phil said softly. He and Techno had set up a small fire on the dirt floor of the cave. They sat next to each other in front of it, now. "Might take a few molts before the feathers grow in right, but... they'll grow back." Techno nodded solemnly. Phil sighed, his breath shakier than he expected. "I thought you were dead, mate."

Saying it out loud made it hurt so much more. He felt like he'd swallowed a knife, like something was tearing its way out of his chest. He had been so sure, in the end, that this was it. Dream was right. Phil would never have been able to kill Ranboo, never have been able to even harm him. He had been so sure it was the end.

"Gave up on me that easy, huh?" Techno asked, and Phil's breath caught in his throat. "Sorry, that's... that was supposed to be a joke."

"I did, though," Phil murmured. "I thought you were gone. I thought that was it." Phil's eyes burned, but Techno gave him the dignity of watching the fire instead of watching his friend's

expression. He wiped his eyes.

“I thought I was dead, too, to be fair,” Techno said, placing a hand on Phil’s shoulder. Phil leaned into the touch. His voice was monotone; Phil couldn’t tell if it was another joke, or if he was being genuine. He supposed it didn’t matter. After a pause, Techno spoke again. “Phil, if I hadn’t shown up... would you...” He was trying to find the words, but he couldn’t. “What would you have done?” Phil sighed.

“I don’t know,” Phil said. It was a lie. He knew exactly what he would have done. He’d have kept fighting for his life, trying to get through to Ranboo, trying to convince him to surface without hurting him, and then eventually Dream would have killed him.

But it seemed Techno understood that already. Silently, carefully, Techno reached over, putting his arm over Phil’s shoulder and pulling him close.

“I don’t know what I would have done, either,” Techno said. His words rumbled in his chest. Techno’s hugs always felt like getting an embrace from a rock. They were firm, stiff, but steadfast and secure in a way that felt like there would always be earth beneath your feet. When Techno released him, Phil felt like he was lighter.

“How long was Ranboo awake before I got back?” Phil asked. Techno shrugged.

“Not sure. He woke up a bit on the way home, but he was groggy,” Techno answered, and Phil nodded solemnly.

“Did he say anything about... about what happened? Does he remember anything?” Phil asked. Techno’s expression shifted, a darkness coming across his features. “What?”

Techno turned to look at Ranboo, who was sleeping on the ground behind them. His chest rose and fell steadily, his face slack. He looked more peaceful than Phil remembered seeing him for a long time.

“There’s something you need to know,” Techno had said, turning back to the fire. And then he told Phil the true extent of their betrayal; how long it had been since Dream had taken Ranboo under his control, how long it had been since Ranboo was no longer himself.

How long they had failed to even notice something was wrong.

How Ranboo could ever forgive them was a mystery to Phil. How he could run into their arms, how he could feel safe, how he could be held, it was all lost on him. Techno told Phil how Ranboo hadn’t even wanted to tell him, how Ranboo reminded him that Dream had access to all of his thoughts, all of his memories, how Dream was a perfect mimic of Ranboo, a mirror and a reflection in one.

It didn’t make Phil feel any less sick at the thought. The knife in his throat grew sharper.

Now, Phil watched as Ranboo found himself standing in the village square at the entrance, looking around at the abandoned houses and scattered bones as though the world was spinning in front of his eyes, until finally he came to a stop and doubled over with his hands braced on his knees.

Phil stepped toward him, his expression twisted in sympathy as Ranboo lowered himself unsteadily to the ground and sat with his knees bent in front of him. He groaned, halfway between a human sound and a warble, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes. Phil knelt down in front of him.

He knew Ranboo was crying again. The burns on his cheeks and under his eyes hadn’t yet had the time to heal. Ranboo had cried so much when Phil had returned from the mansion that the burns had become dotted with blood by the time he finally sunk into sleep. Phil could see the boy trying as hard as he could to calm himself now, tilting his head back to stop the tears from falling and breathing as deeply and evenly as he could manage; whether it was to save himself the pain of opening those wounds again or simply to calm himself before he slipped into hysteria, Phil didn’t know.

“Ranboo?” Phil asked after a long moment of silence. He heard Techno walk up behind him, standing silently over them.

Ranboo hummed quietly, bringing his hands away from his eyes and tilting his head back down to look at them. Small patches on his palms looked irritated, but he seemed to have avoided any more significant damage to the skin under his eyes. Regardless, he still winced when he blinked. Ranboo inhaled and let the breath out in a deep sigh, looking around again briefly before shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, mate,” Phil said. He settled himself down on the ground with Ranboo, crossing his legs in front of him. He began to tuck his wings in, a force of habit, but stopped when he felt the muscles in his back ache and a twinge of pain shoot through his flight feathers. He kept them slightly spread instead, resting against the ground as comfortably as they could considering their sorry state.

Techno set his axe against the ground beside the two of them before sitting as well. He moved slowly, deliberately, with far more care than Phil was used to seeing him use. Techno tended to throw himself around with reckless abandon. Seeing him grimace at even the act of sitting down made Phil feel almost uneasy.

“I don’t remember any of them,” Ranboo said softly. His face was slack, so neutral that Phil could hardly tell what he was thinking. Ranboo ran his thumb over the totem absentmindedly. The setting sun glinted off of its emerald eyes. “I keep thinking maybe... maybe something will bring it all rushing back.”

“Maybe someday,” Phil posited, though he didn’t know how convincing his optimism was. Ranboo smiled slightly, but shook his head.

“I think it’s gone,” he said. “I think...” he swallowed, blinking slowly. “I don’t think any of it’s coming back.” Phil didn’t know what to say. It seemed Techno didn’t, either. Blind optimism at this point was just that; blind. “And you know, I thought– I thought maybe since the curse of Binding started to wear off once Karl died that maybe it meant the curse of Vanishing would too, but... if that was true, then I should have remembered by now.”

“I think it has worn off, in a way,” Techno said. Ranboo looked up at him briefly before his gaze flicked away. “I mean, when you first came to us your memory was a hundred times worse. You’d forget what you were doing halfway through doing it. Would have forgot your own head if it wasn’t attached to your body,” Techno shrugged.

Ranboo smiled, breathing out a halfhearted laugh.

“I guess,” he said. “Everything was so foggy, then. It was all so confusing.” Ranboo paused, furrowing his brow slightly. “Well, it’s still confusing. I guess it was a different kind of confusing. Disorienting.” He looked down at the totem in his hand, staring at it solemnly. “It feels like so long ago.”

“Yeah,” Phil said, and Techno nodded silently.

“Do you think...” Ranboo began, “Do you think, if you could go back—” he cut himself short, clenching his jaw. “Nevermind. Just— forget I said anything.”

Phil knew what he wanted to ask. It wasn’t hard to guess: if they could go back and change any of this, make it so they never met Ranboo, so they never brought him in from that storm, would they do it?

Phil didn’t have to think more than a second on his answer, and neither did Techno.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” Phil said at the same time that Techno said “no” with firm decisiveness. The corner of Ranboo’s mouth twitched, and he nodded slightly.

“Thank you,” he said so quietly that Phil almost couldn’t hear him. Ranboo took another deep breath. He’d been doing that more, lately. When he inhaled, he made sure it filled his lungs down to the bottom before letting it out, and each time Phil could see the way he dropped just a little more tension from his shoulders.

He couldn’t imagine what it felt like. He couldn’t imagine what it had been like before, either, to have a spectre haunting him in every step, to share a mind with such a parasite. And now, it seemed Ranboo was learning to let go of that tension he’d held for so long, for as long as he could remember, and for as long as Techno and Phil could remember, either.

Phil would often catch him watching; watching nothing in particular, just... watching. On their way back, he would pause sometimes, craning his head back to watch as wind rustled the canopy of leaves overhead, or spin to watch birds as they swooped past, or examine the still fading spiderwebs of scars that traced their way across his skin. It was like watching someone see the world for the first time.

In a way, perhaps that was true. It was nice to see such a sparkle in his eye, even if it was alongside a glint of mourning. Ranboo's eyes held an age to them now that Phil wished he'd never have to see. It was one of the few mercies of Wilbur leaving when he did; he never had to see him grow up.

"I don't know if I want to remember them," Ranboo said.

It was far more of a confession than a statement. Phil looked up, but Ranboo was craning his head back to look at the sky. The setting sun was turning the clouds pink and orange where they streaked across the sky.

"I'm angry at him," Ranboo continued. Phil shared a glance with Techno, but neither of them said anything. "Isn't that awful?"

"At Dream?" Techno asked. "I don't really blame you—"

"No," Ranboo said, cutting him short. "At Karl," he said softly, and smiled. It took Phil by surprise, a seemingly odd expression for what he seemed to be feeling. "I'm angry because I don't know what I've lost, and... I don't know if I could handle it if I *did*... but now I don't have a choice." After a long pause, Techno sighed.

"I don't think it's unreasonable to be angry," he said. "I'd call it a pretty rational response, considering... I mean, I'd be angry," he muttered.

"I *am* angry," Phil said quietly. The statement slipped out before he had a chance to stop it. Ranboo tipped his head back down to look at Phil, a puzzled look on his face. Phil blinked, but he couldn't take it back now. "I don't think it's fair," he explained. "And part of me... part of me thinks it was selfish, but I don't think..." Phil sighed. "Who am I to judge? I don't

know what I would have done. If he hadn't done it, you never would have found your way to the tundra, so I guess..." Phil sighed, shaking his head and leaning back slightly. "You should never have had to go through any of this, Ranboo."

Ranboo's eyes trembled slightly, and he blinked a few times before looking away, squinting back up at the sky.

"Do you really think I'm safe now?" Ranboo asked, his voice stuck halfway between hope and hesitancy.

"Do you feel safe?" Phil asked in response, and Ranboo looked down again and examined the totem again. He ran a finger over one of the chiseled eyes, down its face, across its outstretched wing. Eventually, Ranboo nodded.

"I think so," he said quietly. "Yes." He held the totem gently in his hands like it was a feather or a dried flower or a four leaf clover. "I just— we don't know how it works, or what it even *is*... maybe I'm just being paranoid..."

"I think you've earned that right," Techno grunted, and Ranboo smiled. "Maybe we'll find more information in Karl's library," he suggested.

"Maybe," Ranboo said, but it didn't sound like he was convinced.

"And maybe, for now," Techno continued, "we try not to look a gift horse in the mouth?" Ranboo blinked at him.

"I don't... know what that means..." Ranboo said, and Techno chuckled. Phil stifled a laugh.

"It means, let's just take this as it is for a moment. Just... peace. Whether we understand it or not," Techno explained.

Ranboo looked over the totem again before nodding slowly. He let out another long breath, resting the totem back against his chest.

"Yeah," Ranboo said. "That sounds good. I can do that." It sounded a bit like he was trying to convince himself, but the calm returned to his features nonetheless. "It feels so quiet, here," Ranboo mused absentmindedly.

"It does," Phil said. "Makes you wonder what it was like before."

"Dream was proud of this," Ranboo said, looking around at the houses and buildings surrounding the main square, and at the numerous piles of bones that were scattered around as well. "Like it was some kind of masterpiece. He called it a *demonstration*," Ranboo said with disgust.

Phil wasn't sure what to say. It was a common feeling, now, not knowing how to respond. He didn't know what Ranboo wanted to hear. He didn't know if he wanted to hear anything at all, or if he was just speaking to be heard. Phil was happy to listen. Ranboo had been trapped in his own head for so long, he felt he'd earned the right to speak without filter, to voice any thought he had no matter how it came out.

Phil wished that maybe, if Ranboo kept speaking his mind, he'd finally tell Phil and Techno that he was angry with them, or that he was betrayed, or that he blamed them for leaving him so helpless for so long. Phil couldn't fathom how Ranboo could possibly forgive them for this. How was it possible that he held not even an ounce of distrust now for the people who promised to keep him safe and failed?

But in all the unfiltered thoughts and comments and reflections that Ranboo uttered since he'd awoken truly, he never voiced anything other than relief at being in the presence of Phil and Techno. If Ranboo was committed to forgiving them so easily, then Phil resolved to blame himself enough for the both of them. He'd never let anything like this happen again. He would be better. He had to be.

"I want to bury them," Ranboo said, rising to his feet abruptly after a long silence. Phil and Techno both looked up at him where he stood. "All of them. And Karl, too."

“Ranboo—” Techno said, placing a hand on his knee to begin to push himself up, but Ranboo cut him off.

“They deserve to rest,” Ranboo said. “I want to bury them myself.”

“Their deaths weren’t your fault, Ranboo,” Phil said, standing as well.

“I…” Ranboo paused, but nodded. “I know. But they died for me, whether they knew it or not. I want to bury them. I can’t just leave them out here forever. I can’t just walk away.”

“We’ll bury them,” Techno said. “Or, you’ll bury them, and I’ll hold a shovel. Frankly, I’m not in the best shape to be diggin’ graves,” he shrugged. “But you’re right.” He held out a hand to Phil, asking for help to stand up. Phil grabbed it firmly, pulling Techno up to his feet steadily. “They deserve a real place to rest. Just, not right this instant, yeah? It’s getting dark.”

“Yeah,” Ranboo nodded. “Okay.”

“Let’s head to the stronghold, then,” Phil said. “We can make some good food, take a breather. I want to see if I can make any of those healing potions Karl wrote about,” he added.

“Let’s hope you don’t end up poisoning us,” Techno said with a smirk. They started off in the direction of the stronghold, making their way out of the village and back through the trees.

“Look, best case we have potions of healing, and worst case we’ve got some mediocre soup,” Phil shrugged.

“Good point,” Techno muttered. “I just keep trying to figure out how we’re gonna manage to get all those books home.”

“Well, we won’t be able to take them in one go,” Phil said.

“Wow, really?” Techno said sarcastically. “I really thought we could fit ‘em into my backpack.”

“Shush,” Phil said, rolling his eyes.

“You’re tellin’ me I can’t just carry the whole library on my back?” Techno asked, gasping in faux surprise. “Never would have thought. You’re so smart, Phil. Your genius knows no bounds.”

“Thank you, I am rather intelligent, aren’t I?” Phil said, puffing out his feathers slightly with a grin.

“It’s the old age,” Ranboo said quietly. “Makes you wise.” Phil let his mouth hang open like a fish, and Techno barked out a laugh so hard it made him double over.

“Wow,” Phil said. “Ouch. Too far.”

“Yeah, Ranboo, respect your elders,” Techno said, and Phil groaned.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ranboo said, trying and failing to hide a smile. “How rude of me.”

“Honestly,” Techno rolled his eyes with a smirk.

“Kids,” Phil muttered with a shake of his head.

“I know, right?” Techno said.

“I’m talking about you, too, mate,” Phil added, and Techno gasped in disbelief. Phil chuckled, and Ranboo stifled a laugh.

When Phil turned to look, he found the boy had a smile on his face. A real smile, born from real joy. Phil hadn’t realized how much he missed seeing Ranboo smile, or laugh, or hold himself with anything other than tense paranoia, but seeing it now made him remember how they were before all of this began.

“We should start with whatever we can find on Protection enchantments,” Techno said, his tone more serious now. “And Binding,” he added. Ranboo’s ears twitched. “Better safe than sorry.” Ranboo nodded. Techno didn’t have to spell it out for them to understand; the totem was doing its job warding off Dream’s influence, but if Ranboo’s life was threatened, there was no telling if he’d be able to hold off another teleport like he had when the trident hit him. “Wonder if we can find anythin’ to beef up my axe, though,” Techno mused, though it seemed the thought was more to himself than to Phil or Ranboo. “Be cool if it could light on fire or something.”

“Somehow I doubt that’s possible,” Phil chuckled.

“You’re tellin’ me you wouldn’t want a flaming sword?” Techno asked. Phil shook his head.

“Of course I want a flaming sword—”

“Then stop rainin’ on my parade,” Techno huffed. Phil held up his hands defensively.

“Alright, alright,” he relented. He could see Ranboo smiling still, looking down at the ground while he walked.

Eventually, they found themselves back at the stronghold. Ranboo looked around, observing all the small details he couldn’t see with his own eyes the first time they had come. When they got to the main library room, Ranboo stopped in front of the blanket that they had used to wrap up Karl’s bones, staring down at it with expressionless features before moving on to look around at the shelves and books and artifacts.

While he wandered, Phil dug around in his backpack and pulled out more burn salve, tossing the little jar into Techno's hands so that he could reapply it to his wounds. They were lucky piglins were so hardy. If anyone else had been injured like that, they'd be lucky to make it a few hours even if they'd cauterized the wounds the way Techno did from just the infection alone. But Techno's wounds were already healing, pale skin knitting itself together slowly against all odds. Techno seemed hardly concerned at all at the possible repercussions of such injuries. Phil didn't know if that was an indication that he would be fine, or an indication that he was in denial that this would affect him, but in either case, Phil wasn't sure he'd figure out the real answer until much later. He hoped it was the latter. Though even if Techno did feel lasting effects, he wasn't sure the man would ever admit it anyway.

"I wonder if I've read any of these before," Ranboo mused, looking over the spines of the books that were stacked on the shelves. "I must have, right?"

"Definitely," Techno said, lifting the hem of his shirt to apply the salve. "You learned to read and write somehow. And besides, doubt Karl could have stopped you from reading them. You sounded like a curious kid."

"Yeah," Ranboo said, smiling slightly. He ran his fingers across one of the book's covers. "Wonder if any of it'll be familiar."

"I'll venture to guess you'll be better at enchanting than either of us," Phil said, and Ranboo tilted his head at him. "Just my old man intuition." Ranboo smiled, shaking his head. "Help me with the fire?" Phil asked, and Ranboo nodded, letting his hand slide off of the book.

It was always during the more domestic activities that Phil tended to realize how much things had changed. When they paused to build a fire, he remembered each fire that had come before, the context behind each log that was placed. He thought of the fires they lit in the Nether to cook food, or the fire in the oven at the cabins, or the fireplace that Ranboo sat in front of so often with his nose so close Phil worried he'd burn the tip.

When Ranboo held his hands in front of the fire now, warming them from a few inches away, Phil noted the scars that ran across his hands and arms and face. They were slowly becoming more and more faded with each day that passed, dissipating into the black and white skin.

Phil wondered if they'd fade entirely, if there would be no indication of the lightning strike aside from a lingering memory.

He'd never forget the sound of the lightning, the crack it sent through his bones, the static that hung in the air afterwards that made him feel like his skin was being pricked by needles. He'd never forget the way the smoke rose off of Ranboo's body where he lay in the scorched grass. But if Ranboo's body could forget that cruelty, maybe it would be enough.

Karl had kept a well stocked pantry. Techno returned from the store room with dried meat, herbs, and a few jars of what looked like canned fruits. When they cracked the lids, the whole room smelled of peaches and apples and sugar, so sweet they could almost taste it.

They didn't sit at the table to eat once the food was ready. It felt strange, domestic. Unfamiliar after so much travel. Instead, they huddled around the fire, legs crossed and eating with their hands, passing around a jar of peaches. Techno told Ranboo about the first time he'd tasted fruit, how it made him sick to his stomach for the rest of the day because it was so sweet. He had to work up a tolerance, but ever since, his sweet tooth had never faded.

"Pumpkin's still my favorite, though," Techno said, leaning back on one hand while he slurped down another peach. He passed the jar to Phil. "Pumpkin pie, pumpkin soup, pumpkin pastries..."

"I don't think pumpkin is a fruit," Phil said, taking a peach and passing the jar into Ranboo's waiting hand.

"It's a fruit," Techno insisted. "It's got seeds."

"So do cucumbers," Phil said.

"Yeah, cucumbers are a fruit too," Techno said.

"No way," Phil said, shaking his head.

“That sounds wrong,” Ranboo added, licking the tip of his finger.

“I’m right. Read it in a book. It grows from flowers, and it’s got seeds,” Techno said, waving his hand. “Fruit.”

“That’s the criteria?” Ranboo asked, raising an eyebrow. Techno nodded. “Seems a bit open ended...”

“I don’t make the rules,” Techno shrugged. “Tomato is a fruit, too.”

“I think I did know that,” Phil noted. “I feel like Amaly told me that once.” Techno hummed.

“I wonder how she’s doing,” he mused absentmindedly, not thinking much of it, but when he said it a quiet fell over the three of them for a moment.

“I wonder how Ilya’s doing,” Ranboo said quietly. He stared down at the jar in his hands, not looking up to meet either of Phil or Techno’s gazes.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Phil said gently.

“Kid’s pretty durable,” Techno added. “Saw him fall out of a tree once and bounce back like nothing happened,” he said, an attempt at lightheartedness, but Ranboo’s expression was still solemn.

“Do you think you’ll go back?” Ranboo asked. Phil sighed.

“I don’t know,” he said, opting for honesty. “I want to send them a letter. I think, at the very least, Rose and Ilya deserve an explanation.”

“Would they even believe it?” Ranboo asked.

“Maybe,” Phil said. “Ilya would. And Maria’s got an open mind. Rose... I don’t know. Won’t know unless we try, though.” Ranboo nodded. After a moment, he held the jar of peaches out to Phil again, but Phil held up a hand and shook his head with a smile. “I’m fine.”

“Techno?” Ranboo asked softly. Techno hummed, and Ranboo held the jar out to him.

“Ooh,” Techno said and reached for the jar. Ranboo passed it into his hand. As Techno pulled another peach from the jar, Ranboo slowly leaned up against Phil, pressing his shoulder against Phil’s. Phil smiled, patting Ranboo’s knee with his hand.

“Phil,” Techno said. Phil hummed, looking up. “He’s asleep.”

“What?” Phil said, but when he tilted his head to look at Ranboo, he found Techno was right. The kid was fast asleep, leaned against Phil’s shoulder with his head against the wall behind them, breathing softly. “Oh.”

“It’s nice seein’ him so calm, huh?” Techno said quietly.

“Yeah,” Phil sighed. He and Techno shared a look, a silent understanding that they were thinking the same thing, still guilt ridden that they hadn’t noticed sooner that Ranboo hadn’t been himself.

“Are you going to go to sleep?” Techno asked.

“I think I’m gonna stay up for a bit,” Phil said. “Grab me a book, though, will you? Something on enchantments.” Techno nodded, standing up slowly, picking up the lid to the jar of peaches as he did and screwing it back on before walking over to the bookshelves.

While he examined the spines of the books, Phil gently maneuvered Ranboo off of his shoulder, laying him down on the ground carefully with his head against Phil's lap.

Techno walked back over, a few books in his arms. He set the stack down next to Phil, who muttered a quiet "thank you."

"I'm goin' to sleep," Techno said. "Don't stay up too late."

"You sound like such a dad," Phil said, smirking. Techno grunted and rolled his eyes, and Phil stifled a laugh. "Goodnight," he added.

"Night," Techno muttered, settling himself down onto his bedroll. He pulled his cloak over his shoulders and rolled onto his side with a grunt.

He was asleep in what seemed like seconds. Phil could tell by the way his breathing changed, almost snoring but not quite, and then the only sound left in the stronghold was the crackle of the fire in front of them.

Phil sighed, picking up the first book on the stack.

Chapter End Notes

Here, have some emotions. Have I lulled you into a false sense of security yet? :) Don't get too cozy :)))

Anywho..... we're getting pretty close to the end, huh? That's so wild. I still can't believe how much you guys like this and how much support I've gotten. It's insane. Bonkers. But it is much appreciated nonetheless :')

Of course, as always, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

Also, if you wanna come hang, I'm in a cool discord server for dsmp writers!!
<https://discord.gg/w9CwSK26mm> is the link, you gotta copy paste it into ur browser,
and my personal discord is joshuwosh#6989 (feel free to add or ping me if/when you
join, i have LOVED hearing from y'all so far!! :D)

Updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as
I go! We've got 5 chapters yet, and I'll tell ya what, they're certainly not all just
resolution ... :)

9/21 - oops literally forgot to write a bit of this chapter. There was supposed to be more
conversation between ranboo leaning against phil and him falling asleep.... shwoops.
Suspend ur disbelief lmao.

9/24 - ok! I have the next chapter roughly laid out and pre-planned, and i reorganized
some stuff in the final chapters! I'll be writing a lot this weekend, but I'm not sure when
the next chapter will be out. Ideally, i want too get it out by next Monday! We shall see
:0 I'm working and doing classes now but I'm so hyped for the next few chapters i
wanna write them NOW ajighjs

10/1 – happy spooky season y'all :0 still workin! trying to decide if I actually want to
split this next chapter into two and add a chapter to the fic, or if i want to stick to my og
plan. I'm hoping to get the next chap out by monday but we'll see!

10/4 – deepest apologies but chapter is DEF not coming out tonight oof - still working
on it!

10/6 – ahaha crow finish the chapter challenge :) status: pending lol

10/7 – still working i swear. this chapter is a Long Boi so ... hope that makes up for it
XD

10/10 – ok, so I think I will be getting this chapter out by LATEST monday night. I'm
shooting for tonight but... we'll see. It's a weird chapter. But I think i AM going to be
adding one more chapter :0 stay tuned :)

Fractures

Chapter Summary

“I know you regretted it in the end,” he mumbled. “You don’t have to, anymore. You don’t need to worry. You raised me and... and prepared me for the world, and kept me safe, and I’m safe. I’m still safe. I’m alive.”

There wasn’t anything left to say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There were twenty-six bodies in the village in the oakwood. There were twenty-six, in theory. As Ranboo worked, he found remains that were scattered, likely dragged in various directions by various animals, consumed or buried in dens or covered by months upon months of dirt and earth and mud. Maybe one day they would be fossils, imprints in stone, a footprint refusing to be forgotten. These were incomplete bodies, incomplete people.

Ranboo wondered how accurate this number was. He wondered how many skulls had been carried off, how many were missing. He had tried to match up the bones as best he could, to line them up, gently, to piece together people like puzzles until he had a number that seemed to make sense. He tried to put families together. He tried to put children with their mothers and fathers, siblings with siblings. He tried to. There was no way to be sure.

The uncertainty made him feel heavy. It pulled him to the ground, made his feet scuff as he walked through the streets, but he walked nonetheless. He worked nonetheless.

He dug graves for three days. It was almost idle in its repetitiveness. With the totem that now hung from his neck came a quiet Ranboo hadn't known in a long time, a quiet that left him to think, that let him be. Just to be. Phil and Techno watched on. They had offered to help; Techno out of formality, as his wounds were still healing and his movements still stiff and sore (an offer he knew would be refused out of concern for his well being), and Phil out of genuine intent and care, an attempt to lessen the burden Ranboo had placed on his own shoulders (an offer he, too, knew would be refused).

Ranboo knew this was not his fault. It was not a burden that he needed to bear, but it was a burden he wanted to bear. The villagers should at least be buried by someone they knew. They didn't need to know he didn't remember them. He tried to love them as best he could as he lowered their bones into the earth.

Phil had brewed potions of Healing from a recipe he had found in one of Karl's books, or perhaps his father's books- one of them, or both, had left notes in the margins. The first brew has tasted like dirt. Techno had told Phil as much. The second brew was thick and grainy. The third, though, tasted sweet and soft and light. It coated Ranboo's throat and sunk warmly into his stomach. When Techno drank, he had tipped his head back, closed his eyes. Phil had shaken his wings out, a few singed downy feathers fluttering down to the ground. They said the potion made them feel light, floaty, awake. Ranboo wondered if it felt similar to when the totem had been placed around his neck.

He had been skeptical, at first, that the potions would help, but the effects were now slowly becoming clear. Phil's damaged feathers were slowly molting, replaced by budding stems of new growth. The burns were slowly becoming less irritated, pinkish and shiny. The dent in Techno's neck was becoming shallower, the charred edges less raw. It didn't lessen the guilt Ranboo still felt, but Techno was beginning to move like himself again, slowly, and that made things feel better.

The skin on Ranboo's palm and fingers was knitting itself back together as well. When he held the shovel and dug the graves, the wounds burned, ached and throbbed to the beat of his pulse, but they did not bleed. They did not reopen.

When each of the twenty-six graves had been dug, the bodies placed below the earth, and the dirt returned to its place, Ranboo went back for Karl.

Phil and Techno walked back with him, helping him wrap Karl's bones tightly in a blanket they found in one of the chests. Ranboo carried him to the village, laid him in a grave. He stood over it, watching the small bundle as though it would miraculously come to life. It was one last chance for this all to be some dream, some trick.

Karl didn't come to life, of course.

Ranboo stared down at the tattered blanket. He didn't feel angry anymore. He didn't feel that crushing guilt, either. A sense of calm washed over him now, a peace he was slowly growing more used to as time went on. Clarity.

"Do you feel better?" Phil asked cautiously. Ranboo took a moment, considering the question, taking inventory on his body, on his emotions.

"Yes," he said after a pause. "I think so. Yeah. I was... I was worried I'd feel worse," he confessed, and Phil nodded like it had been a concern of his as well. "But I think it's good. I think... I don't know. Maybe they can rest now. With each other."

"I'd like to think so," Phil said gently. Ranboo nodded slightly. "Do you, um..." Phil paused, stumbling over his words a bit before finding what he wanted to say. "In the village I lived in a long time ago, when we had a funeral, people would offer to say a few words. You know, for the deceased."

"Oh," Ranboo said.

"I know you don't remember him, but maybe it would be good. Get some closure."

"Closure," Ranboo repeated. What a strange concept. Everything had been so unpredictable until now. "I don't really know what to say," Ranboo admitted.

"I can... if you want, I can try," Phil offered, and Ranboo nodded, taking a half step back. "Well... let's see. Haven't... haven't had a funeral in a while," Phil said. "I'm a bit rusty." Techno snorted, and then cleared his throat to hide it, steeling his expression. Phil raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," Techno muttered. Phil hummed.

"Well... let's see. Karl, I didn't know you very well... or at all, I guess," Phil said, "But you seemed like a good man. Someone who cared, and someone who tried his best. In the end,

sometimes that's all you can do." Ranboo nodded slightly. "And the rest of this village, I guess all I can say is that you didn't deserve to die like this. And I hope now maybe... maybe you can get some peace." Phil paused, rubbing the back of his neck. "And Karl, I hope you can rest knowing Ranboo is safe with us, now," he added.

"Yeah, don't worry about your kid. We've got him," Techno said, humming in agreement. Ranboo tilted his chin down, looking at the ground to hide the warmth he felt now spreading through his chest and cheeks. He felt something on his shoulder and looked up to find Phil resting his hand on Ranboo's back. He nodded his head toward the graves.

"Oh," Ranboo muttered. He cleared his throat. "I still... I still don't know what to say," he said quietly. "I mean, out of all of us, I should have the most to say, right?" Ranboo looked to Phil, then to Techno, but both of them shrugged noncommittally.

Ranboo hummed, looking back down at the graves.

"I knew you," he continued. "I knew the whole village, too. But I don't remember." Ranboo rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I don't need to tell you that. You already know." He sighed. "I know you did what you had to do. Or what you *could* do. And I... I don't know how anyone could be forced to make that choice so— I don't... I don't blame you. I don't hate you."

Ranboo knelt down, settling himself beside Karl's grave.

"I know you regretted it in the end," he mumbled. "You don't have to, anymore. You don't need to worry. You raised me and... and prepared me for the world, and kept me safe, and I'm safe. I'm still safe. I'm alive."

There wasn't anything left to say. Ranboo took a breath, picked up his shovel, and packed dirt over the blanket that contained Karl's remains. When the grave was filled, he placed the shovel on the ground and walked to the patch of wildflowers that grew at the edge of the forest outside the village, carefully uprooting a few flowers and holding them gingerly in his hands.

The dirt didn't fall out from between his fingers. He found himself thinking back so long ago to when the three of them were harvesting potatoes, when they finally figured out what hybrid Ranboo was, his origins. He and Techno had sat for so long translating those old texts that had sat gathering dust on his shelves. Maybe they'd do that again with Karl's books, too.

He planted the flowers at the head of the grave and stood back, finally finished.

"It looks good, mate," Phil said. "I'm sure they appreciate it." Ranboo hummed, looking down the line of graves, each marked with flowers at the head. In time, maybe the wildflowers would spread and new life would bloom here.

"We're heading home soon, right?" Ranboo asked quietly.

"Yeah, I think so," Phil said. "It's about time we get back, don't you think?" Ranboo hummed again. It was strange to think they'd be going back soon, back to something familiar, to something safe. The place where his memory began.

"So we just... we just go back to normal?" Ranboo asked. It sounded so bizarre. After everything, how could they just go back? How could they go back to fixing the fences and knitting sweaters and planting potatoes?

"Yeah, mate," Phil said gently. "We just go back to normal." Phil placed a hand on Ranboo's shoulder, and Ranboo subconsciously reached up, resting his own hand on top of it. *Normal*. It felt like a lie, but it was a lie Ranboo elected now to believe.

It was weird to pack up books that weren't theirs. It felt almost like theft, like entering someone else's home and leaving with their most prized possessions. These books felt like they belonged on the shelves, the ingredients like they belonged in the pantry, the fractured sword like it belonged in that dark room, hidden away next to the chest.

“This all belonged to you, too,” Phil reminded Ranboo. Ranboo shrugged, tucking another book into his backpack.

“It just feels weird, taking it,” Ranboo said with a shrug. He looked over at the empty slots on the shelves where they’d taken books out. “But I guess it’s no use letting them sit here and rot away.”

“That’s the spirit,” Techno said, patting him on the shoulder lightly.

“You’re sure you can carry this much?” Phil asked him, eyeing Techno’s pack suspiciously. They’d loaded Techno’s bag with mostly potion ingredients, but even so, the weight of carrying a backpack with the injuries he’d sustained was cause for concern.

“I’m *fine*, ” Techno insisted with a groan. He folded up a few pieces of paper on the table and tucked them into one of the inside pockets. “Those healin’ potions really work wonders.”

“Nothing comes for free,” Phil said.

“Eh,” Techno said dismissively. “Plenty of stuff comes for free. Air. Water. Stolen property—”

“Alright, alright,” Phil said, rolling his eyes, and Ranboo hid a smile, shaking his head.

Phil was right, though; they needed to be careful, all of them, but especially Techno. It was difficult to encourage him to take it easy, despite everything. Phil had opted to distract him with the more gentle tasks at hand; checking on the brewing stand, skimming through books to decide which they wanted to take back, condensing information on different ingredients into one cheat sheet they could take back with them. They were stationary tasks; they kept Techno busy, and Techno knew it, but he humored Phil anyway.

Ranboo was thankful he did. He hated watching as Techno would groan when he stood up, or when he paused mid-sentence to roll his neck to one side or the other. Sometimes he’d graze his fingers across his shoulder or his side absentmindedly. Ranboo couldn’t tell if, in those

moments, he was truly thinking back to what had been done to him, or if his body was simply recalling the events without his acknowledgement.

Regardless, the action never escaped Ranboo's notice. And when Techno caught him watching him, studying those movements, he'd smile at Ranboo with such kindness in his eyes that Ranboo had to look away.

To Techno's dismay, they couldn't take the entirety of Karl's library with them. Their choice in selection had to be narrowed down to only the most important texts, the ones that could give them the knowledge they needed to get started. The knowledge of the enchanters was not readable in a day, nor was it transportable in a backpack.

They took with them what they could, as many books as could reasonably be carried and all of the potion ingredients they would need to brew more potions of healing and regeneration and strength that they didn't have at home, with the intent to return as soon as they could. Phil wanted to let the damaged feathers on his wings molt out and grow back in, and let Techno's injuries heal as much as possible.

What he didn't say was that he also wanted to be sure Ranboo was going to remain *himself*. He wanted to be sure that the totem was working, that it didn't have any flaws, any hidden catch, any mysteries that remained. He wanted to be sure Ranboo was just that, just himself; just Ranboo.

But he wasn't – he wasn't just Ranboo. Phil and Techno were pointedly avoiding the fact, but Ranboo couldn't; Dream was still there. He was pushed back, locked away, hidden behind this holy protection, but a bug caught under a cup is still a bug, after all. He was still there.

At least he was silent.

Ranboo tried to take comfort in that, in the peace he felt now. In how easy it was to fall asleep, in how simple it was to wake up. How good it felt to breathe in and feel cold air hit the bottom of his lungs. He could appreciate this. If Techno and Phil could take comfort in this newfound safety, in this pause to the chaos around them, then he could as well. He owed them peace of mind.

“Which do you think is more important, fermented spider eyes or proper collection of magma cream?” Techno asked, holding up two books in his hands. He held one close to his face, squinting at the pages.

“You packed your glasses, mate,” Phil mumbled.

“Answer the question,” Techno huffed.

“We can get magma cream from trades,” Phil said.

“So fermenting?”

“I think so.”

Techno nodded, setting one of the books aside and putting the other into his backpack.

Ranboo rummaged around in a few of the chests that lined the far wall of the library that seemed to be a larger version of the junk drawer in Phil’s kitchen; it was a mish-mash of old parchment, potion ingredients, empty glass bottles, and other such randomness. At the bottom of one, he found three small bottles of shimmering orange powder, which he pulled out and examined.

“I think I found more blaze powder,” he said, standing and bringing the bottles over to Techno. Techno took one of them, holding it up to the light. It sparkled, reflecting blue lantern fire in the particles.

“Perfect,” Techno said, passing it back to him. “The piglins at the lower bastion don’t usually have blaze rods to trade, and the nearest fortress is quite a hike. We should take back as much as we can.”

“Phil, do you have room in one of those front pockets of your pack?” Ranboo asked. “Mine are full of lapis.”

Phil wordlessly held out his hand, and Ranboo placed the little jars in his palm.

“Oh, this one seems important,” Techno said, pulling a book from the bottom of the shelf in the far corner of the room. “It’s got gold thread.”

“Fancy,” Phil said. Techno gave him a look. “I was being serious!” Phil said defensively. “What’s it about?” Techno leafed through the pages.

“Protection enchantments, looks like,” Techno said. Ranboo’s ears perked up. “Different levels of strength, field notes on how long it lasts on different pieces...”

“Good information,” Phil said. “Here, I’ll put it in my bag.”

“I’m resistin’ the urge to read all of these right now,” Techno grumbled, closing the book and passing it over to Ranboo so he could give it to Phil.

“I know. So brave of you. Must be torture,” Phil said sweetly, and Techno rolled his eyes.

Ranboo’s eyes lingered on the book as he placed it in Phil’s hand; it had a dark leather cover, gold thread woven in and out of the border along the edge that caught the light in odd ways. So many of these books were written by Karl or his father, field notebooks or research or studies conducted, diaries and journals. Reading through them would take a while. Distilling them to their most important takeaways would take even longer.

Though Ranboo supposed they had time. Everything now felt like a precaution. It wasn’t time sensitive. Ranboo was protected now, stable, sound of mind. They could take their time learning all of this. He had to remind himself of that often.

Still, the paranoia remained like a shadow that followed him in every step. They didn't know how any of this worked. They didn't understand. They could guess, and they could believe, but they couldn't *know*. Not for certain. Ranboo longed to be certain, just for once. He longed to know. To be sure.

On the large table in the center of the room, there were three books that remained; Ranboo's two memory books and Karl's diary. They would be tucked away into Phil's backpack soon enough. Ranboo had read through Karl's diary when they'd returned from the mansion, pouring through every page one night by the fire. He read while Phil slept. When Techno noticed him picking up the diary, he said nothing. When he noticed Ranboo eyeing the memory books, though, he gave him a stern look.

Maybe he was right; maybe it wasn't worth the risk. But Ranboo was so curious to know—would the totem protect him from this? From the thing that brought Dream out? It was an experiment he couldn't afford to see fail, but one he wished he could conduct nonetheless.

"D'you think the pumpkin pastries have gone bad?" Techno asked.

"You put them in the freezer box, didn't you?" Phil responded, and Techno furrowed his brow, thinking hard.

"I dunno," he mumbled eventually. "Probably. Hopefully."

"Well if you left them on the counter, then they're definitely stale, if not moldy," Phil shrugged. He did up a buckle on the side of his backpack.

"Ugh," Techno grunted.

"If you were smart, you'd have put them in the freezer box," Phil noted.

"Well maybe I'm not smart," Techno huffed.

“He did say *if*,” Ranboo said. Techno shot him a look of betrayal.

“It’s a pretty big *if*, isn’t it?” Phil said, and Ranboo hummed, nodding.

“*Hey*,” Techno warned. “Remind me which one of us forgot a steak in the oven for three whole days?”

“That was one time,” Phil shot back. Techno held up two fingers to Ranboo, mouthing *twice* silently. “Shut up! The second time doesn’t count!” Phil groaned.

“Why’s that?” Techno asked.

“Because you still ate it,” Phil responded. Techno considered this for a moment, pursing his lips.

“You know what, that’s fair,” he said eventually.

“Gross,” Ranboo said quietly.

“Food’s food,” Techno shrugged. “I was hungry.” Phil rolled his eyes dramatically, muttering under his breath, and Techno gave Ranboo a lopsided smirk. Ranboo shook his head, smiling.

“Is it quartz?” Ranboo asked. Phil shook his head. “Uh... is it... glowstone?”

“Glowstone’s not white,” Techno pointed out.

“It’s white-ish,” Ranboo muttered. Techno raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not glowstone,” Phil said.

“Is it a ghaſt?” Techno asked, his voice low and bored.

“Mate, if I ſaw a ghaſt don’t you think I would have found another way to tell you that isn’t *I Spy?*” Phil asked. Techno snorted a laugh.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t that be funny?” he asked. Phil rolled his eyes.

“It’s not a ghaſt.”

“Skeleton,” Techno ſaid.

“No.”

“Sand,” Techno ſaid.

“No.”

“Sand’s not white, either,” Ranboo ſaid. “There’s not even ſand near here.”

“It’s close enough to white,” Techno groaned. “This game is dumb.”

“You’re just mad because you’re losing,” Phil taunted. “It’s not sand. Keep guessing.”

“Oh! Is that...” Ranboo squinted at the horizon where there was a distant ledge of soul sand. On top of it was a glint of something pale. “Bone! Bone stuff. What’s that called. Fossil!”

“Yes!” Phil exclaimed.

“*What?*” Techno said. “Where do you see a fossil?” Phil pointed to the ledge. Techno squinted hard, leaning forward as though that would help. “How do you even see that far, that’s ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous is how bad your eyesight is,” Phil said. Techno grunted at him.

“I only just noticed it, actually,” Ranboo said. “I have no idea how you saw it from so far back.”

“Creepy bird man,” Techno mumbled.

“Watch it,” Phil warned. “It’s your turn, Tech.” Techno sighed deeply, looking around at the Nether waste around them.

“Uhhhhhh,” he grumbled. “I spy... somethin’... red.”

“Is it netherrack,” Phil said.

“Yep.”

“Techno, you’ve picked netherrack the last three times. You can’t keep picking netherrack,” Phil muttered.

“Watch me,” Techno responded.

“You’re no fun,” Phil said. “Ranboo and I are having *fun*. Right Ranboo?” Ranboo smiled, nodding his head with enthusiasm. “Quit being a killjoy.”

“Fine,” Techno said. “I spy somethin’ old.”

“Is it Phil?” Ranboo asked.

“Yep.”

“Hey!” Phil cawed. “Well I spy something blind!”

“You skipped my turn,” Ranboo said dejectedly.

“I got glasses to fix my eyes, Philza. What’s your solution?”

“You little shit,” Phil said.

“I spy something white,” Ranboo interrupted. Techno looked to Ranboo, and then followed his gaze out to the far end of the Nether waste. He snorted.

“See? I told you it would be funny,” Techno said, drawing his sword just as the ghast turned toward them. “Phil, if you roll your eyes any more you’re gonna lose them in the back of your head.”

Ranboo watched carefully while Phil preened his feathers. He had one wing tucked behind him, the other spread out in front of him with. He separated the feathers, pulling them apart gently, smoothing his fingers across each of the feathers from base to tip. Every so often, he'd stop on one of the more burnt sections, gently working free debris or charred portions.

As he worked, he shook out his wing in brief, trembling motions, the feathers shivering as they fell back into place. Some laid flat on top of each other, others stuck out awkwardly, awaiting their turn to be tucked back into place.

It was mesmerising to watch, the repetitive and practiced motion coming so naturally to Phil it was like watching him breathe. His hands made their way over the feathers quickly, end to tip, end to tip. The darker, more blackened parts of his feathers had slowly fallen off or been picked away, and there was very little blood staining Phil's wings now. Even so, Ranboo made sure not to forget where it had once been dotted in between his feathers. It was hard to see unless he looked close, but once he saw it, he wouldn't forget.

Phil looked up, catching Ranboo watching him. Ranboo shifted his gaze awkwardly, looking down at his own hands instead. Phil chuckled, shaking his wing out again.

"Not the best they've ever looked," Phil said, brushing his fingers across the top ridge of his wing. "But not the worst, believe it or not."

"Oh?" Ranboo asked.

"Yeah," Phil said sheepishly. "A long time ago, I was teaching Wilbur how to make honey candy—"

"Oh, I remember this story," Techno said with a chuckle, not looking up from the book he was reading. Ranboo couldn't see the cover, but it looked handwritten.

"Ugh," Phil groaned, pulling a bit of debris out of some of the feathers closer to his shoulder. "Wil swore he didn't mean to, but he spilled the whole pot over my primaries, *and* my

secondaries. And some of the coverts, too. That's these ones," Phil said, gesturing to the shorter feathers that layered themselves overtop of the long primaries at the tip of his wings. "Hot sugar melted the barbs, but it hardened and got all sticky and it was *everywhere*," Phil groaned.

"My theory's that he did it on purpose," Techno said with a smirk. "Sounds like something he'd do."

"Sounds like something *you'd* do, mate," Phil grumbled.

"Psh," Techno said, waving his hand at Phil dismissively.

"How'd you get them clean?" Ranboo asked.

"I picked out as much as I could, washed in warm water and all that," Phil explained. "But eventually I just had to let the feathers fall out and regrow."

"They fall out? All of them?" Ranboo asked.

"Not all at once," Phil clarified. "But yeah, they molt and get replaced by new feathers."

"Oh," Ranboo said. It made sense now that he thought more about it. He wasn't sure why he was thinking about feathers like broken bones, like if you broke one it would heal. He watched as Phil ran his fingers across the netherrack ground, scooping up some red dust as he did. He ran it over the lengths of some of his feathers, tucking them into place before pulling his wing back behind his back and rolling his shoulders.

"But since they don't fall out all at once, it took *months* for all of that sticky mess to finally get cleared out. Wil tried to pluck my feathers out for me because he thought it would help," Phil laughed. "He was just a kid at the time, six or seven I think."

“Wilbur, he’s... he’s the one in that photo, right? With the letter?” Ranboo asked. Phil nodded, a warm smile on his face. “You mentioned him once,” Ranboo said. “I think,” he added, narrowing his eyes.

“I did. That was after the fire,” Phil said, tilting his head slightly as he thought back to the moment. “You still have no idea how much it meant to me that you saved that letter, mate,” he added.

Ranboo blinked at him, surprised at the sudden gravity in his tone, before nodding slightly. He remembered the look on Phil’s face when Ranboo had shown him he’d saved the picture from the fire, the relief that had washed over him.

“I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately, actually,” Phil said, glancing toward Techno briefly before looking back at Ranboo.

“You don’t talk about him often,” Techno noted absentmindedly, turning a page in his book.

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve been... I don’t know. Wondering about him recently. Where he is, what he’s been up to. If he’s—” Phil stopped, considering his words as he looked into the fire. “How he’s doing,” he finished.

“The way you’ve talked about him, he’s probably kickin’ up trouble halfway across the world,” Techno said. “Startin’ a revolution or something, who knows.” Phil laughed, shaking his head. “Ranboo, what’s this say?” Techno asked, holding the book out at arm’s length. Ranboo leaned over, his eyes sweeping the page until he found the words in Enchanted.

“*At will, or as time permits,*” Ranboo translated.

“That... doesn’t help at all. Thanks,” Techno mumbled, pulling the book back towards himself and squinting at the words.

“Sure thing,” Ranboo said, and Phil shook his head, smiling. “What happened?” Ranboo asked, turning back to Phil.

“Hm?”

“With Wilbur,” Ranboo clarified. “What happened? You said... you said he left, right?”

“Oh, no, nothing *happened*,” Phil said. “Not like how you’re thinking.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said. “I just thought... you sounded sad about it, after the fire.”

“Ah. Well, it’s not a sad story, really,” Phil said, smiling sheepishly. “I know I make it sound like that a lot. It’s just because I miss him, you know? And I mean, it’s not even really a story, it’s just... life. A different life.”

Ranboo tried to imagine Phil younger, somewhere far away, somewhere else and someone else. He found himself drawing a blank.

“What was it like?” Ranboo asked. Phil looked up at him with a hum. “That life,” Ranboo clarified. “What was it like?”

Phil thought about the question for a moment before shrugging lightly.

“Different,” he said. “I don’t know. Much more... social? The village was a little bigger than the east village, and they were closeby a few other villages so they had a good bit of trade going on, too. Lots of kids, lots of animals, so it just felt... much louder. I mean, you know us now, Techno and I. We’re certainly homebodies.”

“Shut-ins, one might say,” Techno added.

“Yeah, one might say,” Phil laughed. “The quiet is nice, though, isn’t it?” He asked Ranboo. Ranboo nodded.

“It is,” he said. Part of him had long been coiled with anticipation to just lay in his bed, to watch the tundra winds sweep up swirls of snow in the night, to watch the moon rise slowly over the frozen lake. The silence was piercing then, even with so much going on in his mind. He wondered what it would be like now, with everything so clear, so uncrowded. He wondered if the quiet would be peaceful, or if it would be unsettling.

It was already becoming unsettling, sometimes.

“Life with Wilbur was louder,” Phil said, his voice lost in thought.

“How...” Ranboo began, but all the questions he had couldn’t fit into one request. “Can you tell me about it?” He asked instead.

“What do you want to know?” Phil asked. Beside him, Techno leaned back onto his hands, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“I don’t know,” Ranboo said. “All of it,” he said. “You tell good stories,” he added quietly. Phil chuckled.

“It’s pretty boring for the most part,” he responded, pulling his other wing forward so he could preen the feathers there as he spoke.

“I want to know,” Ranboo said. There was so much he wanted to know, now that he could keep it all straight in his head. He wanted the stories, the histories, the important things, the things you only told family. He wanted the secrets. He wanted to be one of them, a secret of his own.

Phil’s eyes softened, and he nodded, running his fingers along one of the massive primary feathers at the tip of his wing.

“Well, I think I said before, it was a long time before I met Techno,” Phil said, his expression turning nostalgic.

He began to tell a story of another life; how he came to discover the village as a young adventurer, how they’d asked for his help dealing with a spider nest in exchange for food and shelter. The nest was underground, but the spiders had started making their way to the surface after a flood had passed through the area. They had already sent a group out to destroy the nest, but they hadn’t returned.

The job was simple, so Phil accepted. And when he was done, he accepted their shelter, a small home left behind by an old herbalist who had died. He had every intent for it to be temporary, a small stop along a much larger journey – but the food was good, and the people were kind, and the children ran around plucking flowers and placing them between his feathers.

So he stayed a few days, and then a week, and then a few weeks. And it made sense that, if he was going to stay, he might as well clean his place up a bit, so he fixed the bent hinges on the door, and replaced the pane of glass in the window that was cracked, and nailed the floorboards back down into place where they were sticking up. And while he was at it, he figured he might as well fix the front door of the barn, and patch the leaky roof of the butcher’s store, and at that point he may as well help to prepare some steaks and pork ribs for the fall festival that was coming up soon.

It had been easier than he had expected to stay. Life as an adventurer was put on hold, the maps tucked away, put on hold in favor of the dull, satisfying hum of daily life.

It wasn’t long after Phil had arrived in the village that he met Wilbur.

“He was a rambunctious little shit,” Phil said simply. “Got into trouble wherever he saw it possible, just because he could. But I figured, all he wanted was someone to *see* him.”

Wil was a lanky kid with a mess of curly brown hair, and when he smiled, his eyes practically disappeared and his cheeks and ears would go pink. He wanted to live, wanted to fight and explore and understand. The village held no ties for him. His parents had died not long before

Phil had arrived; he had no siblings, nor cousins, and one estranged aunt who looked over him as little more than one might look over a pet. He ate, he slept, he worked, and he was bored out of his mind.

Rather than let him waste away into idle apathy, Phil began taking him on his outings; when they gathered herbs, Phil taught him the names of the leaves and what they were used for; when they set traps, Phil taught him the difference between snares and what bait to use where; and when they encountered mobs, Phil taught him where the weak spots were in a spiders exoskeleton or how to strike a zombie so it went down in one swing.

There was a love in his eyes, a love Ranboo recognized, but it wasn't quite the same. It was a twin to the love Phil showed him, showed Techno. It had a longing to it, an ache, where to them it was new, present. To them, his eyes were bright and close. When he spoke now, it was like he was a thousand miles away.

He spoke of another time like it was an alternate universe; a window that was aged and foggy on one side and crystal clear on the other. Phil taught Wil all he knew, but it wasn't enough to tie the boy down to the village; in fact, it did the opposite. It made him long for something more, something different, something that wasn't the same clearing full of mushrooms or the cave that had spiders every so often.

Whatever threads had still bound Wil to the village, Phil had cut them, whether he intended to or not.

"He started becoming more distant. I thought maybe he'd found a girl or something," Phil said, plucking woefully at the downy under-feathers near the top of his wing. "He liked to go off on his own, test himself, test what he knew. And one day, he didn't come back."

There was nothing he could have done to stop it, nor did he want to. To stop Wil from leaving would be little more than selfish, like leaving a dog tied to the front stoop all day and night. Like cutting a bird's flight feathers.

Phil gave Wilbur the world, so Wil took it.

“I know it wasn’t personal,” Phil said. “I think he knew if he told me he was leaving, I would have tried to go with him, and I think he would have pitied me too much to tell me no. And I think I knew something was up,” he added. “He made me dinner the night before. He never cooked dinner. He was a shit cook, but he still tried.”

Phil’s eyes shone. Ranboo couldn’t tell what emotion was held behind them, but whatever it was, it was too much to be held back now. Pride, maybe, or sadness, or nostalgia, or longing, or maybe simple memory.

“I don’t know if you would have liked him, Ranboo,” Phil said, smiling gently. “He might have been a bit much for you. I suppose he’s probably changed a lot by now, but I’d be surprised if he’s toned himself down at all.”

“Do you know where he is?” Ranboo asked hesitantly. Phil shook his head.

“I’d send him a letter, though, if I had any way of getting it to him. I’ve got a stack of them at home. Letters. But there’s not many couriers these days, you know?”

“You never... you never tried to find him?”

“He didn’t want to be found. The least I could do is respect that. I used to have dreams that he was in trouble, that he needed help, and I couldn’t do anything. Now I just dream he’s happy.” Phil smiled. His eyes caught the light from the fire and held it somewhere deep in his soul. “He was a piece of work sometimes. I don’t doubt he got himself in trouble. Probably loved every second, too.”

“Sounds like he took a page out of your book, then,” Techno said with a smirk.

“Nah,” Phil said. “He took the whole book and left me a page.” Phil sighed, smoothing his feathers down. “I know I shouldn’t have expected him to stay forever. Kids grow up, and they move on, that’s just... that’s just what they do. I’m happy for him now. But back then, I couldn’t stand to look at that place without him there. It felt so empty. But I get why he left.”

Ranboo thought about Wilbur, alone.

How could someone want to be alone? To leave behind something so familiar, something so comfortable, so warm, so loved? Ranboo had only just found *familiar*. There was nothing he wanted more than to maintain it, to hold it close, to stay.

There was a time when running felt like an option. Now, it wasn't even a last resort.

"I don't think I get it," Ranboo said quietly. "Why he left, I mean."

"Well, that's what makes you different, I suppose," Phil said, smiling warmly. There was something more in his eyes, a strange kind of gratitude. Maybe Phil was glad Ranboo was different; that Ranboo didn't want to leave.

But it made him wonder, what stories would Phil tell about him? About this? In his absence, whatever situation that may be, what would be said of him?

Fear surfaced before Ranboo had time to squash it down or hold it under the surface of his thoughts. It was a fear he hadn't had the chance to feel the first time around, the first time he'd found family. It was a fear Karl had spared him, the mercy of not knowing what you were leaving behind.

He didn't know what he'd lost then. But he'd know, now. What if he lost this, after having loved it for so long?

He listened, cautiously; listened for that voice, that thing that fed so easily on his fears. There was silence. Somehow, that felt worse. It felt like even more of a taunt. The silence was a reminder of what used to be there – or rather, what was still there; what was dormant. What was temporary.

Phil and Techno looked at him now like he was so *permanent*. So *certain*, so *sure* that they'd done it, that they were safe. But Ranboo felt more and more like a kettle taken off the stove

moments before boiling. Return him to the fire, and he'd boil once again.

"I just want to know," Ranboo said, frustration building in his chest. "I just want to be sure."

"It's a risk, Ranboo. Why take a risk?" Phil asked. He gripped the memory book in his hand tightly, holding it closed as though relaxing for even a moment would allow it to spring open and unleash hell. Ranboo hunched his shoulders.

"What's the point of this totem if it means I still have to tiptoe around waiting for something to set me off?" Ranboo demanded. "I'm supposed to be safe, I'm not— I'm not supposed to feel like this!" His voice cracked and he pinned his ears back, clenching his fists. He hadn't realized it, but a low groan had begun to build in the back of his throat.

"You *are* safe—" Phil insisted, but Ranboo cut him off.

"You don't know that! You don't— *ugh* !" The groan grew louder, mixing with a higher pitched wail. He couldn't make it stop. It rang in his ears and made his chest feel tight.

"Hey, hey," Phil said softly, lowering his voice. It made Ranboo feel even more like a glass about to shatter. Phil passed the book into Techno's hands and stepped toward Ranboo cautiously. "Where's this coming from?" Ranboo shook his head, wiping at his eyes. The burns there were nearly healed, but the skin still felt raw and thin to the touch.

"Don't you want to be sure?" Ranboo asked.

"You never know anything for sure, Ranboo," Phil said, placing one of his hands on Ranboo's and pulling it away from his face. He put his other hand on the back of Ranboo's neck. The touch felt cold, cutting through the dense heat of the Nether.

“That’s not true,” Ranboo said. “If I read it, I’d know— I’d know if it works. If it *really* works, if it’ll keep me safe. Wouldn’t you rather know now than have it happen by accident, like last time?”

“I’d rather it not happen at all,” Phil said gently, but the statement just made Ranboo more frustrated. His chest felt tight and his skin tingled, and the scar on his hand throbbed with his heartbeat.

“Well it might! Even if we’re careful, it might,” Ranboo insisted. He stepped back, away from Phil’s hands, digging his fingers into his palms. He hadn’t felt like this in so long. So frustrated, so invisible.

“And it might now,” Phil noted.

“Ranboo, Phil’s right. Maybe this isn’t the time or the place—” Techno said, but Ranboo cut him off.

“Then what is? When we’re home? When we think we’re safe, and we’re finally back and settled and then it’s ruined?” He demanded.

“When we can figure this out *carefully*, ” Techno said. “When we know we’ve got fail-safes in place, and when we’re not surrounded by things that can kill us.” His voice was low, logical, rational, and Ranboo knew it, but some part of him just wanted to *push*.

“You don’t know any of it will work,” Ranboo said. “You don’t know.”

“That doesn’t mean we don’t try, Ranboo,” Phil said, his tone becoming more serious. “We’ve come too far to be careless, now. We just got you back.”

A memory shuddered through Ranboo; a memory of being locked away, blocked out, clawing and screaming to be free only to be silenced, to be left unheard, unseen, thrashing and wailing and like a rabid animal with such force it made his whole body hurt.

With the memory came a chill he couldn't describe, like ice pouring through his veins. It made the pitchy groan in his throat cut off abruptly, dwindling down until the only sound around them was the howl of the Nether winds outside.

He felt heavier. Not by much, just slightly. It was enough to make him freeze in his tracks.

"Ranboo?" Phil asked, cautiously stepping forward. Ranboo could see the fear in his eyes. The same worry was in Techno's, as well. It was just more proof; they'd never be free of that fear. There would always be doubt. They would always worry that one wrong step, one wrong word would set things in motion once again. He saw it on Phil's face now, the fear that he'd gone too far, that he'd said something wrong and now the downfall of this peace would be his fault.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo said, unsure of what else to say. He was selfish, involving them in his pointless experiments of the mind.

"What... are you okay?" Phil asked.

"I'm okay," Ranboo said, trying to sound as assuring as he could. "I just... you're right," he murmured.

"I didn't mean to make you upset," Phil said. Ranboo shook his head.

"No, you... you didn't..." He couldn't find the words anymore.

There was too much in his head, too much all at once. He didn't want them to worry anymore. He didn't want them to be involved, to be the reason, to be to blame. They couldn't be to blame. He wouldn't let them blame themselves again, which meant that now... now wasn't the time. Techno was right. It wasn't the time or place.

“I think I’m just exhausted,” Ranboo said finally, trying to do away with the expectant gazes that Phil and Techno were giving him.

“I mean, you’ve got good reason to be tired,” Techno said, keeping his tone casual. Ranboo sighed, letting his shoulders sag.

“I’m sick of feeling like this,” Ranboo mumbled, shaking his head. He made his way over to the fire, sitting down in front of it with a thud. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Techno tuck the memory book into the bottom of Phil’s pack, out of sight but never out of mind.

“It won’t always feel like this,” Phil said.

“What if it is?” Ranboo said miserably. “What if it is forever? What if I feel like this forever?” Neither Phil nor Techno had an answer for him. He pressed the heels of his palms further into his eyes until he saw stars behind his eyelids.

“Do you... I mean, do you feel Dream?” Phil asked cautiously. “Is the totem—”

“No, it– it’s working, that’s not–” Ranboo groaned, trying to find his words. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Then... what?” Techno asked.

How could he even explain it? It was a feeling of dread, a whisper, something hanging over his head. The totem around his neck was beginning to feel like a noose. It tightened with each passing moment. It felt like an inevitable, a promise.

“Are you afraid?” Techno guessed, correctly. Ranboo took his hands away from his eyes, staring at the ground. “It’s okay to be afraid. You’ve got more reason than either of us.”

“I don’t want to be. I want to be grateful,” Ranboo said. “I want to appreciate this and just... just be normal. I’m finally myself again and I can’t even be happy about it.” He sighed deeply, opening his hands and staring at his palms. There was a thick scar running across one hand, raised and pink across his fingers as well. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you, kid,” Techno said. “This’ll just take some getting used to, that’s all. The totem’s working now, right?”

“Well... yeah,” Ranboo said.

“Dream’s quiet?” Techno asked. Ranboo nodded. “And he’s been quiet since you put the totem on, right?”

“But he’s still *there*, ” Ranboo said. “All that keeps him away is this,” he said, wrapping his fingers around the totem.

“That’s what we’re learnin’ enchantments for,” Techno said. “So you’re not just relying on one little thing. We’ll learn protections and binding and all that. You’re not gonna be hangin’ by a thread for very long. We’ll make sure of that.”

Hanging on by a thread felt like a good way of putting it. Accurate, even. Ranboo felt torn between optimism and fear. He wanted so desperately to trust, to be rid of the paranoia he felt and just be happy with what he had. Why couldn’t he just be satisfied? How did he feel so heavy and so weightless at the same time?

“Look, Ranboo...” Techno said, and then paused, picking his words carefully. “You’re right. We don’t know anything for sure, and I don’t know that we’re goin’ to. For now though, let’s just take it one day at a time, okay?” Ranboo sighed. One day at a time. He could do that. He could try.

“Okay,” he said. He had to try.

“Okay,” Techno echoed.

Ranboo listened.

He listened to the sound of breathing, a soft, steady sound that rose from Techno and Phil alike, calm and consistent. He tried to match it, tried to sleep. Tried to ignore the tension he felt in his chest, the cotton in his head.

He listened to the creaking of the warped trees that loomed above them, the waves of hot wind blowing them side to side. They sounded old. Ancient. He listened to the crunch of dry moss underneath him as he turned from side to side.

He listened to the silence that echoed inside of him.

The quiet was becoming loud. It was becoming a reminder of what used to be there, like a hole, like a void. The absence of Dream was almost worse than his presence. It was a threat looming ever on the horizon, waiting, watching. He was being taunted still. He wouldn't escape it. He was his own torturer, his own undoing.

This is what was driving him mad. This feeling. Whatever salvation Karl had believed this totem to be, it wasn't. Salvation didn't feel like this. Safety didn't feel like this. He knew it was true. No matter how much he tried to push that paranoia down, he knew it was true.

There was more. There had to be more. There had to be an answer, something more than this tension that made him feel ready to tear himself apart at every turn.

Ranboo moved slowly, carefully, silently pulling his hand up to grasp the totem in his fingers. It was warm to the touch, always, like it was alive. It had comforted him for a time. Now it unsettled him. He pulled it away from his chest, looking at it in the dim light, the gold body, the outstretched wings, the emerald eyes.

The gems caught whatever light they could, reflecting it outward in white glints. And as Ranboo peered closer, he found what he was looking for, what he had been looking for ever since he'd put the thing around his neck.

One was cracked.

One was blissfully cracked.

The left eye was cracked. Through the center of the emerald was a thin, hairline fracture, a small chip at one end. It made it seem duller, like it contained less life.

Somehow, this made sense.

He was right, then. Right to be afraid. Right to be paranoid. The totem was just like everything else; mortal, destructible, fallible. It had a limit. It could die. Just like everything else, it could die. Ranboo stared into the totem's eyes, suddenly feeling much more clarity than he'd felt in what felt like months.

The crack meant that Dream was fighting back against the protection, just as he'd done with the circlet that Karl had used, slowly destroying it until it was rendered useless. It meant the totem would, eventually, be destroyed, its magic used up, its enchantments rendered useless. It had a time limit. It would die. And when it did, when its lifespan was allowed to run its course, it would bring Ranboo and Phil and Techno with it in its death.

The pieces fell into place easily now. Ranboo knew what had to be done. There were no guarantees, no truths, no certainty. There was only an offering. A plea. And in the absence of any god who may be listening, there would at the very least be an attempt; an attempt to be free, an attempt to be safe, an attempt to keep his family safe, out of harm's way.

Ranboo knew what had to be done.

Chapter End Notes

Uhhhhhh I told you it was long :)

next few chapters are the big ones, folks. hold on to your butts.

<3

Of course, as always, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

Updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

10/12 - holy cow we hit two huge milestones overnight - 80k hits, AND 3k kudos :0 I cant even express how grateful I am to all of you for the support and love you've given this fic <3 whether you've been following it since I posted, or you just binges the whole thing overnight, thank you for being here!! Im so excited for the next few chapters that I already started working on the next one!!

10/17 - hey guess what. next chapter might be out as soon as tomorrow night. :0

The Call of the Void

Chapter Summary

This was not death. This would not be death. He reminded himself again and again; he wanted to live. That's why he was doing this. To live. For all of them to live. More than anything, he wanted to hold onto this, to be safe and to be loved, and to love, and to keep them safe.

"This is what will save us," Ranboo said. "We have to kill it. Or it'll kill us. We have to kill it."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Night in the tundra brought with it a certain weightlessness that couldn't be pinned down by words. It escaped time, escaped space, just an endless stretch of glittering snow lit by stars and moonlight and idle winds that passed through, there and gone like travelers you meet on the road. The air at dead of night felt like it reached further than it should, like it went beyond your lungs and carried itself into blood and bone, and when it left, it took with it the heavier burdens of the world.

Ranboo stared out at the tundra now and felt weightless.

He saw the glittering snow, and he breathed in the air that carried into his bones, and he breathed out his fear until there was nothing left but clarity and calm.

Weightless, blissful calm.

There was something so uniquely peaceful about the act of making a decision like this. It made Ranboo feel the world so much more vividly. The chill of the tundra tickled his skin, making the hair on his neck stand on end and the scars that dotted his body tighten just enough to remind him they were there.

He stood on the porch in nothing but the clothes he'd worn to sleep. It didn't feel very worthwhile to get dressed, so he remained barefoot, receiving the full chill of ice that spiderwebbed across the wooden planks under his feet. The thin, too-short pants did little to stave off the temperature, but against his chest, the totem retained its warmth. It radiated a dull hum of energy, carrying a life of its own.

Ranboo reached into his shirt, pulling it out to examine it once again for the thousandth time. He ran his finger over the crack in the eye. Pieces were slowly falling away from it now near the edges like crumbs, and the eye had lost all its shine. Ranboo sighed, letting it fall back into place against his chest.

The quiet here was just as unsettling as he'd thought it would be.

When they'd returned from the Nether, there had been noise; the crunch of snow underfoot, wind in the trees, the idle conversation Phil and Techno made about what they'd make for dinner, how they'd unpack tomorrow, how they were so excited to just sleep in a bed, in *their* beds.

Phil made tea and lit the fireplace, happy to find that nothing had blocked the chimney in the time they'd been gone. Techno despaired over the pumpkin pastries he had, in fact, forgotten to put in the freezer box. They warmed up hot soup on the stove and drank it out of big wooden bowls.

Afterwards, little more was exchanged than relieved smiles and exhausted sighs and quiet *I'm off to bed*, an awkward exchange of out-of-place normalcy that felt tense and fractured. It was an attempt.

And so they slept; or Techno slept, and Phil slept, and Ranboo tried to sleep. He waited for that tiredness to wash over him, but it never did. He laid awake with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling above, motionless. It felt wrong to sleep here. It felt impossible. Eating was one thing; talking, sitting down, lighting the fire, that was one thing. But sleep was just *too* normal.

To sleep meant to return to what was as though nothing had changed. It meant to close his eyes on the world and turn his back to the danger that loomed all around him. It meant to

dream. And to dream here was dangerous. To dream here was inviting the unknown into sanctuary.

So he laid awake until dawn came, until light began to peer through the crack of his curtains, and Phil stirred upstairs and made the floorboards creak overhead. When Phil asked how he slept, he lied. When Techno asked how he felt, he lied. He put on a mask. He helped clear out the ice from the porch, brought meat up from the cellar to thaw, checked on the barns. The redstone heaters had kept the cows warm, and Phil's feeder system had kept them fed, though they were certainly not pleased to be left alone for so long. They'd grazed the area around the barn to a muddy mess. The little calf with only one ear nuzzled into his hand as though nothing had changed.

The farms were a little worse for wear, the barn in need of cleaning, and the cabins were cold as ice, but despite that, it still felt like they'd come back mere moments after they'd left. It made it all the more strange.

Ranboo didn't sleep the second night either, nor the third, but he held out. He waited for their sake, to give them just that little bit more normal, that little bit of time to feel at home. But he could see it in their eyes, too, a knowing – that this was not done, that this was not the end. It was a matter of time; they were all just too reluctant to say it out loud.

So finally, he decided it was time, and here Ranboo was, standing in the cold, barefoot, warmed only by an artificial life.

It felt fitting. He remembered a time when Techno had found him like this, standing out in the cold in nothing but pajamas. The memory was foggy, like a story someone told him rather than a memory of his own. This would be clear, though. This memory would be clear. He took a deep breath in through his nose, letting the frigid air tickle his throat, and let it out in a puff of cloudy air all at once.

Beside him, leaned up against the railing of the front porch, there was an old woodcutting axe. The handle was dense hardwood, smoothed from years of use. The head hadn't been polished in a while, but it was still sharp, a few chips in the blade but nothing more to damage its function. When he picked it up, it was heavier than he expected. It would serve its purpose.

He wrapped his palm around the haft just below the head of the axe, adjusted his grip slightly, and then stepped off of the porch.

The snow didn't burn at first. That was the thing about the cold; when his own skin became frigid enough, it didn't melt the ice as fast. He could feel the soft flakes against his skin for a moment, as they were meant to be felt. They ticked the underside of his feet and made him suck air in between his teeth. It made his lips curl into a smile for some reason, an unintentional reaction. For a few steps, it was as though his body's aversion to water was nonexistent, as though he was simply walking barefoot through snow with no further consequence than the potential for frostbite.

As he continued out away from the cabins, though, the snow that clumped around the ends of his pants and that rested on his skin began to tingle, pricking like needles, and then slowly he began to feel the familiar stinging ache that water brought with it.

The feeling was surprisingly grounding. It made this all seem more real.

He put one foot in front of the other. The air was cold, the moon was high, and the sky was clear; it was a beautiful night. Not too cold, and free from biting wind or snowfall. The weather had grown slightly warmer in the time they were gone. Ranboo made his way through the snow slowly, listening to the crunch under his feet, until he found himself standing at the frozen edge of the lake that stretched out as far as the eye could see to the south.

The ice was thin at the edge. When Ranboo poked at the spots between the rocks at the shore, it squeaked as it cracked. It was a strange noise, one that seemed to echo across the lake but muffled over the snow. He blinked down at where his toes rested on the edge of the ice. When he squinted, he could see where the water moved slowly under the surface.

He prodded his toe further out, testing the ice over the water.

When he placed more weight down onto the ice, it creaked. There was a feeling in his head like cotton being shaken around; soft and subtle and hardly there, but *there*.

He greeted the feeling like it was an old friend, and then stepped out onto the ice.

There was a sense of urgency to this, now that it had been put into motion. The feeling was aided by the creaking of ice under his feet. It was thinner now that the weather had warmed up a bit, and he was grateful that he didn't weigh enough to crack it. He'd never been able to put much weight on his bones after a certain point. He wondered if that was due to the Enderman side of him.

Part of him knew that he had to hurry, and the notion was proven right fairly quickly after he started walking. He knew Techno had a sixth sense for danger; Piglins often knew when one of their own was in trouble, and it was an instinct that had now served to rouse the hybrid from sleep. Ranboo had already walked a ways out onto the ice when he heard Techno's voice carry out across the tundra.

"*Ranboo!*" Techno's voice carried surprisingly far across the snow. "Ranboo stop!" Ranboo turned over his shoulder as he padded across the ice. He saw Techno grab a rock out of the flowerbed on the porch and throw it hard at Phil's window. He had his axe in his hand. It seemed he'd learned a lesson since last time, prepared for a fight from the start. *Good*, Ranboo thought. *He'll need it.* "Phil, wake up!" Techno shouted, and then jumped off of the porch, skipping every step.

Ranboo turned back to the ice, pacing further out, carefully placing his weight down from toe to heel. He breathed deeply. Techno couldn't come out onto the ice, he was sure of it. He'd crack it when he stepped out, and he wouldn't risk sending those cracks out to Ranboo for fear he'd fall through. He could hear Techno's heavy footsteps crunching through the snow, though.

"Dream!" Techno shouted. It made Ranboo pause, slowing to a stop.

"It's not Dream," he called, turning back to look at Techno. He and Techno faced each other. Even from this distance, Ranboo could see the heave of Techno's chest, the fear and anger and confusion that was etched into his face. "It's not Dream," he repeated. He knew Techno could see the totem now that hung around his neck. It caught the moonlight in its remaining emerald eye. "It's just me."

"You're lying," Techno said. Ranboo shook his head.

“I’m not,” he answered. “I’ve got the totem still, see?” Ranboo held up the totem around his neck. “It’s just me.” Techno skidded to a halt at the edge of the lake.

“Ranboo what...” Techno stared across the lake at him. He looked skeptical, like he wasn’t certain whether or not Ranboo was telling the truth, whether this was another trick. Ranboo couldn’t blame him. “What the hell are you *doing*?” Techno said. He sounded desperate. It made Ranboo’s stomach twist.

“I’m going to get Dream out of my head,” Ranboo said. As he did, he saw the door open to Phil’s cabin far behind Techno. Phil emerged from the door, frantically pulling on his boots as he ran toward Techno and Ranboo.

“What– that doesn’t answer the question, Ranboo!” Techno sounded frustrated, but more than that, he sounded scared. “Just... just come back here, walk back. *Slowly*,” Techno added. Ranboo looked down at the ice under his feet.

He sometimes forgot how starkly different the two tones of his skin were. The moonlight glinted off of the white side, drawing out shades of pink and pale purple and blue. He remembered the story Karl’s diary had held of his spawning, how the life had slowly drained from him, only to be held off by his body’s half attachment to this world. Now he’d rely on his other half to take him away from here.

“I’m going to draw him out,” Ranboo said, looking back up at Techno. Phil was nearing the shoreline. “I’m going to teleport, and bring him here.” Ranboo stepped back as Phil ran up beside Techno. Techno held an arm out, stopping him from running out onto the ice. Phil was probably lighter than Techno, but they still wouldn’t risk it, Ranboo knew it. He was counting on it.

“Techno, what’s going on?” Phil asked. “Why’s Ranboo on the lake? It’s– it can’t be– Dream?”

“He says it’s not,” Techno said. “He says it’s just him.” He sounded angry about it.

“Are you sure?” Phil asked.

“It’s not Dream,” Ranboo called, shaking his head. “It’s just me. It’s all me.”

“What—” Phil began, but Ranboo had already started to speak again.

“I’m going to bring him here, and then we’re going to kill him,” Ranboo said. Realization began to spread across Phil’s face.

“Ranboo, you’re going to end up killin’ yourself,” Techno said. He inched forward, not daring to place his weight onto the ice, but still trying to get as close as he could. Ranboo knew all he wanted to do was rush out there, drag him back to shore, back to safety. “After everything we’ve done, you’re going to end it like this—”

“It has to end like this!” Ranboo shouted. “It has to end with this thing *dead*. It has to die. Otherwise it never ends, it never...” Ranboo shook his head. “I’m going to teleport,” Ranboo said. “I... I’ll teleport, and Dream will be out of my head. For good. And he’ll be here, and we’ll kill him.” Ranboo had never expected his own voice to sound so venomous, so sure in violence, but here he was.

“This is crazy, Ranboo!” Techno said. “You’ve got the totem, and Phil and I— we’re learning enchantments, and we’ve got a plan. For once, we’ve got a real plan to keep you safe.”

“I’ll never be safe,” Ranboo said. “Not as long as he’s in my head. No amount of protection will make me *safe*, and you know it. You both know it— we *all* know it, and no one’s *saying* it because you don’t want to admit it!” Ranboo said, his voice slowly rising. As it did, he felt the familiar pitchiness of a wail building in his throat. “This whole time, no one wants to admit that we’re exactly where we were before. You don’t want to admit that nothing changed. The totem isn’t magic, it isn’t the key, it isn’t even a solution! It’s temporary, *everything* is just *temporary* —”

His cries were cut short by a sudden creak under his feet. Cracks began to spiderweb out from underneath his left foot, thin, hairline cracks that made the ice bend slightly underneath him.

He shifted his weight, slowly, patiently, off of it and stepped back again.

The cracks didn't follow him, but their presence was a warning Ranboo could read clearly. The sense of urgency remained. Phil and Techno both froze in place as though that would do anything to stop the ice from cracking further.

Ranboo took a breath, watching the warmth cloud the air in front of him.

"If I fall through the ice, I'll teleport," Ranboo said. "I know I will. I can make it happen. I felt it before... before the lightning. I made it stop then, but I can make it happen now."

"Why?" Phil asked. "That's what we've been avoiding this whole time, isn't it? It's what Dream *wants*."

"You're playing into his hand," Techno said.

"Maybe," Ranboo mumbled. "But there's not another way. I can't do this," he said, shaking his head. "I can't live with this fear, knowing he's just lurking there behind a curtain. This protection won't last forever."

"You don't know that—" Techno started, but Ranboo cut him off.

"I do," he said with certainty. "The totem is cracked." The statement made them fall silent. Ranboo looked down at the totem around his neck, taking it in one hand. "It's cracked. One of its eyes... it's broken. It's breaking. Just like the circlet."

"It can't be," Phil said. "It's... Karl said—"

“Karl was wrong,” Ranboo said. “It’s not the solution we thought it was. When it breaks, we’ll be back to where we started. Nothing we do will prevent that, it won’t matter. I know you don’t believe me, but I’m not just doing this on an impulse—”

“Really?” Techno said. “Because this feels a bit impulsive to me.”

“Would you just *listen* to me?” Ranboo pleaded. The desperation in his voice was enough to quiet Techno. “He’ll always be in my head unless I can get him out, and the only way to do that is to bring him into the real world.”

“So you give him what he wants?” Phil asked. “So he can kill you?” The fear in Phil’s voice made Ranboo’s stomach turn.

“If he’s in the overworld with me, then he can be killed like me,” Ranboo replied. “It needs to die. I need it to die.”

“Ranboo, please,” Phil said. He inched closer to the edge of the ice. Techno gripped his arm firmly. “Let’s think this through. We can make a plan.”

“You’d never let me do it,” Ranboo said. “You never would have agreed to this.”

“Of course we wouldn’t have agreed to this!” Techno shouted, his voice cracking.

“That’s why I’m doing it,” Ranboo said. “This way, it’s not your fault.” The statement silenced them both. In that moment, he knew they understood. He knew they saw.

There were two paths forward that Phil and Techno saw where Ranboo only saw one. The path they aimed to travel was one of biding time, of waiting, of convincing themselves that they were doing all that needed to be done and disguising hope as confidence. And then when there came a time when they needed to do more, when their best wasn’t enough, they would hesitate. Ranboo knew they would hesitate. And now, he confirmed, they knew it, too.

He knew it was more than he could ask of them, to strike him down without second thought, to save themselves. The totem would break, or the protections would fail, or the curse would fade, and they would try to save him despite knowing they would fail, and it would cost them their lives— and it would be their fault, because they knew as well as Ranboo did, they could not bear to do what needed to be done if it came down to it again. Phil would watch Ranboo kill Techno, or Techno would watch Ranboo kill Phil, and Ranboo would watch himself kill both of them, and it would be a fate worse than death to do so.

So this was the alternative; Ranboo would be to blame. He would be the one to make the fatal mistake, to draw Dream out— to invite him. He would decide the circumstances and the terms on which he teleported, the conditions of this fight, the words that would mark his grave. If it was his death that came of this, it would be his fault as well. Just so long as it wasn't theirs.

Ranboo knew he was driving them mad. He knew they loved him, knew they would suffer to see him in pain. But he knew they would suffer more to see the end of this peace, and that's what would happen if he let Dream emerge on his own terms, not before whittling away at his sanity first. He would not end up like Karl, alone and mad and full of grief and regret; his fate would be worse. He would live with the knowledge that he could have turned and fought, and instead he ran.

So now he would fight.

This was not death. This would not be death. He reminded himself again and again; he wanted to live. That's why he was doing this. To live. For all of them to live. More than anything, he wanted to hold onto this, to be safe and to be loved, and to love, and to keep them safe.

"This is what will save us," Ranboo said. "We have to kill it. Or it'll kill us. We have to kill it."

He let the totem fall out of his hand and lay against his chest once again. If this was truly something holy, truly something that would save him, perhaps it would help him now. Perhaps it would help him do what needed to be done and come out of it alive.

He fixed his grip on the axe, tensing his shoulders.

“Ranboo, stop!” Techno shouted.

Ranboo took a breath and raised the axe over his head.

He heard Techno say something to Phil, something Ranboo couldn't quite make out, and he watched as Phil glanced at Techno, then at Ranboo, then turned and broke into a sprint running back toward the cabins. He beat his wings behind him, urging them to propel him forward despite the missing and damaged feathers. Ranboo closed his eyes, let the breath out of his lungs, and swung the axe down hard against the ice.

There was a moment before he felt pain, a moment that felt longer than it should have. He felt the world drop around him, the ice falling away under his feet, but he hardly heard the crack before he was already underwater. But for a moment, before the water burned, before it ate away at his skin like acid and seared new scars into his skin, he felt it as it was meant to be felt.

Time seemed to come to a halt in that moment, his eyes shut tight, body wound tight and tensed. He hung suspended in water so cold it numbed his mind in an instant, pushing aside all thought and instinct to swim or surface or struggle.

In that split second, there was no division between him and the world. There was no line where his skin separated his body from the water. It was all just sensation, dark and cold muddling with an emptiness of thought and a weightlessness that neither pulled him down nor raised him to the surface.

For a moment, everything stopped.

Then he felt the pain all at once. It bloomed over every inch of his body, a searing burn, sharp like nails being driven under his skin. In the instant it washed over him, he gasped involuntarily, a reflex that filled his lungs with water and pulled him further from the numbness he had felt only a second ago.

He clawed at the water, his muscles seizing. The water cut between his fingers, tore against his palms. It made his scars ache and his lungs spasm. He brought one hand up to his throat as though it would help expel the water, and with his other hand he reached up toward the surface.

He could not help but feel fear, now. It had escaped him before, or rather, he had escaped it, confident in his choice and surefooted when he had stepped onto the ice. Now, he felt terror, a terror he knew Techno and Phil felt when they saw him on the ice. What if this didn't work? What if he didn't teleport, if he sank to the bottom of the lake below the ice? What if his body laid there, unable to be recovered, preserved as an ever present reminder of each of their failures?

Surely he should have felt that pull by now, or seen the flashes of purple light begin to dance behind his eyelids, or even felt the voice or Dream slowly draw closer. Doubt grew in his chest like creeping vines.

There was no telling how much time had passed since Ranboo fell through the ice; it was an eternity in every eye, to Ranboo under the water, to Techno watching from the lake's edge, to Phil who had turned his back for only a moment.

And yet it was only once that fear took hold in each mind that the void finally answered this distant plea.

Ranboo felt the pull first. Something beneath his ribs lurched, sending a wave of sudden calm through his body. Then came the light, that familiar light, dancing purple and white stars in front of his eyes, and as the little glimmers grew brighter, they each took with them a sliver of that burning, searing pain.

So now, finally, he let that light envelop him.

The Void was thick like syrup, heavy like an infinity of worlds pressing into his skin all at once, colder than the icy water he had plunged himself into just moments before, but it was not painful; it made his skin feel sharp, feel tingly, feel more sensation than he'd ever felt in his life. The burn of the water was gone. It was like waking up from a dream where he didn't

realize he was asleep. Stepping through it was simple, the easiest thing he'd ever done. It was easier than breathing, easier than blinking— it was a second heart, beating of its own accord, drawing him through oblivion.

In that darkness, he saw shadows. They lurked in the periphery of his vision, clouds swirling in the empty space. He saw eyes, dark, staring eyes, and fingers that reached out from the edges of the world, and sideways, crooked smiles.

He saw them reach out, extending bony hands toward him, grabbing at his skin. There was only one he intended to take with him from this place, only one he needed to find. Or rather, only one that needed to find him.

Ranboo wasn't sure how he knew that it was Dream that had grabbed a hold of him— perhaps it was the chill of fear that was so familiar, or the sensation of those bony fingers digging into his shoulder, or the cold breath, or that sound of bones clicking against bones. Maybe it was his eyes, or that smile carved deep into his skull. But whatever it was, it was clear the moment it latched on, digging its claws deep into the skin of his shoulder.

He knew when he returned to the Overworld, the pain would return. He would feel the burns left behind by the water, the ache of cold that would penetrate his bones. He would leave behind this place, never to see it again, and all that would remain would be this, a memory of darkness so heavy it felt crushing and weightless at the same time and of smiles peering at him from shadows.

He allowed himself a moment to see it for all it was, before the pearl called him back. Before the pearl called them both back, two minds now unwinding from each other in the abyss.

Dream dug his claws into Ranboo, and Ranboo sank his own claws into Dream, and they travelled, twin souls, through the Void and back into the icy light of the moon.

Chapter End Notes

So little happened in this chapter and yet so much... ohoho. might have let my inner poet go a little overboard but... well, you gotta let it out every so often.

sooooo... what did you thiiiiink....? ranboo's makin some fun choices, huh?

You might notice that I added another chapter to this story - now it's 30 chapters! So you've got a bit more time stuck with me, fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you see it ;)

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you'd like, lmk your thoughts in the comments, I love chatting with all of you :))) or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

10/23 - started laying out all the moving pieces for the next chapter! But i have a TON of work i need to do so it's not gonna come out as fast as this last one did unfortunately. But progress is progress!

10/24 – god asdjlkj this chapter is fuckin hard to write good lord.

10/28 – holy SHIT this chapter is givin me hell yall lmao. im pretty sure its gonna be a Long Boi. still workin :0

11/1 - i'm 3k words in lads, thinkin this chapter is gonna be like 9k ish aksdljg wish me luck

11/4 - 5.6k words in, hng. this chapter is like. Its the climax, you know? I want it to be good. So its getting to me and im getting all stuck in my head. But I'm working on it :) I promise. In theory, it'll be coming out soon... but Im planning on getting it out by monday!

11/5 - damn motivation babee. next chapter maybe tonight, almost definitely by tomorrow if i dont get it done tonight tho.....

Mercy

Chapter Summary

When the wail began, it seemed to come from all sides. It was a sound that existed almost as though it was coming from inside Phil's mind rather than from any outside source. It wasn't until Phil saw Techno's eyes widen at seeing something far behind Phil over his right shoulder that he could finally find the source of the sound. Things moved almost too fast to track, then.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: Graphic depictions of violence, blood, major character injury

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sound of it sent ice down Phil's spine. It was metallic, ringing in his head like a clash of swords, like an explosion right next to his head. It made him flinch away, ducking as though something was hurtling toward his head, but there was nothing there.

He knew what it was when he heard it. There was nothing else it could be. In all his cowardice, he hadn't looked back when Techno had sent him back to the cabins. He couldn't look, couldn't make himself turn back whether out of concern or curiosity, even when he heard the shattering crack of ice, even when he heard Techno's final call of his name. To himself, he would justify it as determination to find what he was looking for. He would not admit he was afraid to see, afraid to look, afraid to watch.

The sword was still buried deep in Techno's pack, wrapped in a long strip of canvas fabric that Techno had cut from a moth-eaten curtain. Phil unrolled it onto the floor, sending the pieces of the glimmering blade skittering across the hardwood. He scrambled to pick up the pieces, gripping the shattered hilt in one hand and picking up a section from the middle of the sword in the other. The runes of the enchantment still glimmered where they were etched into the metal. The third piece slid under a shelf, but as Phil moved to reach for it, he heard the sound and he knew what had happened.

Ranboo had teleported. The sound left Phil feeling something was missing from the world, like something had been stolen away. There was something now absent that should have been there, and Phil could feel the void it left like it was air missing from his own lungs. With two fragments of Karl's enchanted sword in hand, he ran for the door, picking up his own sword from where it was leaned against the frame and shouldering the door open with his full weight. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recalled all the times he'd yelled at Techno for throwing his whole weight at this door to open it.

There was light under the surface of the lake, a dull glow of purple and white that was slowly dissipating. Particles of color rose from a hole in the ice where Ranboo once stood, axe in hand. It was a picture that told a thousand words.

"Techno!" Phil shouted.

The piglin hybrid still stood with his back turned to Phil, facing the lake, but at Phil's call he turned. Phil had never seen him look so afraid. His face was twisted in such worry it almost seemed agony, a desperation in his features that was jarring to behold.

Almost as soon as he turned, there was a second sound, one that made both of them flinch away from the piercing echo in their ears. It felt like air being pushed into the lungs of the world, an inhale of icy air that burst into life at its end. A shockwave of wind swept across the tundra, kicking up powdery snow and knocking the icicles from the roof. Phil shielded his eyes against the gale.

Even after the echo died down, a familiar wail remained; Ranboo's wail, high and scratchy and veiled in a pain Phil couldn't begin to describe. It made his stomach turn, bile rising in his throat. It wasn't the familiar chirp, the one that felt like a joint cracking just at the base of his skull. This sound was piercing like a knife to the temple.

When the wail began, it seemed to come from all sides. It was a sound that existed almost as though it was coming from inside Phil's mind rather than from any outside source. It wasn't until Phil saw Techno's eyes widen at seeing something far behind Phil over his right shoulder that he could finally find the source of the sound. Things moved almost too fast to track, then.

Phil tried to decipher what he saw. There were two figures, now, one unmistakable Ranboo. Even from a distance, he was a distinct figure. He was held in the air by his throat.

The creature that held him was something straight out of a nightmare, out of hell, out of some ungodly realm.

It's eyes were hollow, carved into its head and so empty that darkness leaked from the sockets. A slit was chiseled into its face, upturned at the edges in some mockery of a smile. It stood before them, skin stretched tight over bones that were far too long, fingers sharpened into claws that bent and cracked, ribs that creaked and twisted like old wood.

It's head was disconnected, suspended in the space above his collarbones.

It cast a shadow.

Phil heard static.

This was Dream. This was what Ranboo saw in his dreams, in his nightmares. This is what Ranboo had seen when he enderwalked, when he plunged his hand into the bucket of water, when he'd read the memory book in the village. This was what he was afraid of.

As Phil's blood ran cold, he began to understand.

Dream held Ranboo aloft in the air, his clawed fingers wrapped around the boy's throat. For a moment, they were still, motionless as statues. Then, Dream took a step forward, planting one clawed foot firmly, and tossed Ranboo across the snow like he weighed nothing.

The sound of the wail flickered in and out of Phil's mind as Ranboo tumbled through the snow banks. It quieted when Ranboo came to a halt, stumbling and trying to get his legs beneath him. He stumbled and fell sideways for a moment, but pushed himself to his feet as quickly as he could, his motions jarred and clumsy. Phil heard him cough and gasp for air, shaking out his soaked hair.

Steam rose from his body. Phil could see it catching the light from the moon, small plumes climbing into the air before disappearing into the night. It drifted off of his arms and clothes and head. Phil hoped it was just from the change in temperature. Ranboo doubled over, pressing his hands against his eyes and face before shaking his head again and stumbling back another step, trying so hard to keep himself upright. Across from him, the dreamon tilted its head and began to walk forward. It was all the prompting Phil needed to take off running towards them.

He could hear Techno's heavy footsteps behind him, and he beat his wings, trying to get what little extra boost he could. When his shredded feathers caught against the air, they ached. He cursed his injured wings now more than ever. If he could fly, he could intercept Dream in an instant. If he could fly, he could have swept Ranboo off the ice before he had a chance to drop through it.

There was no time to linger on *what if*s. Dream strode toward Ranboo, the creature's long limbs carrying it across the snow with bizarre grace. It moved fluidly, and with each step it creaked and cracked like old trees in a storm. When Ranboo finally looked up to see it standing before him, Phil could see the fear flash across his face.

As soon as the fear appeared in Ranboo's features, it was replaced with something else; determination, perhaps, but laced with something more, an anger, a rage that seemed so out of place and unfamiliar. Ranboo tensed, his shoulders hunched, eyes narrowing.

"Ranboo, run!" Techno shouted. He was closer than Phil had expected, and the sound of the voice almost startled him. "Run away!"

Part of Phil expected Ranboo to freeze, to stare Dream down as he approached; another part expected him to follow Techno's command, to turn and run as fast as he could from this nightmare. But Ranboo did neither. Instead, he took a step forward, and then another, and then another, until he was running at Dream with as much intensity and speed as Phil and Techno were running toward him.

The dreamon paused in its approach, and somehow, it seemed as though it smiled even wider. As Ranboo drew closer, it straightened its spine, rolling its shoulders back before reaching out with long sharp fingers. Phil's breath caught in his throat.

Ranboo ducked under its outstretched arm. He slid across the snow, turning as he did, and pushed himself up once he was behind Dream. He wrapped his arms around Dream's chest and dug his claws deep into the creature's ribs. Phil wondered absentmindedly if Dream had blood. It looked like nothing more than skin pulled tight over bone, like if you cut it, it would fray like torn fabric or rip like parchment.

Dream howled, a terrible static sound that made Phil's heart beat hard in his chest. It brought its hand up to wrap around Ranboo's forearm, wrenching itself free from Ranboo's grasp and throwing him to the ground with enough force to knock the wind from the boy's lungs. It swung down with its other hand, but Ranboo rolled to the side just before Dream made contact, scrambling to stand up once again.

"Phil, the sword!" Techno said, finally catching up. "Give me the sword!" His voice was strained. Phil fumbled with the shards in his hands, tucking his own sword under his arm to pass a fragment of the sword into Techno's waiting hand. The shards still shimmered with light, a strange iridescence that made them feel somehow heavier and lighter at the same time.

"Will it work?" Phil asked. Techno wrapped his fingers around the fragment of the sword, not even looking down at it as he ran. His gaze was fixed on Ranboo and Dream, so focused that Phil almost faltered at the intensity. "Techno—"

Another howl cut him off. Phil snapped his attention back to Ranboo and Dream. Ranboo had latched himself back onto Dream, his claws now digging into his arm and shoulder. He raked his hand down Dream's arm, shredding skin from bone.

Black blood fell from the wound. Phil wasn't even sure he would call it blood; it was thick, far thicker than blood should be, like honey or tar, and when it fell to the snow it sizzled as it melted through to the earth beneath.

Dream seemed to shudder, its static howl growing louder. It thrust its hand forward, clamping firmly around Ranboo's throat and lifting him into the air once again. Ranboo kicked his legs into its chest like a small child.

Phil had expected to see fear. He had expected Ranboo to be terrified, to be begging and pleading, to look to Phil and Techno with desperation, but Ranboo's gaze was trained on Dream, his pupils hardly even slits, his teeth barred like a wild animal. It was jarring to see him like this. It reminded Phil so clearly of when they'd first found him, when they'd been cautious, when Techno had wondered if he was dangerous, if he would hurt them. At the time, there had been kindness behind those eyes, youth that Phil could see so clearly, innocence that resonated with him so strongly that he couldn't bear to leave it to die.

Now, though, those eyes were so far from innocent. They were a wild animal's eyes, bent on survival.

Ranboo clawed at Dream's arms, harsh noises escaping his throat that echoed in Phil's mind. They were so close, so *close*, only a few more steps—

Techno got there first. He swung his axe down on Dream's arm, and Dream let go of Ranboo just as the blade would have cut through his skin. Ranboo fell to the ground. With his other hand, Techno swung out with the shard of Karl's enchanted sword, but Dream had now fixed its gaze on him. It slipped out of the way just as Techno lunged forward, the edge barely grazing its ribcage. With its remaining arm, it thrust its palm into Techno's chest, sending the piglin sprawling backwards through the snow.

Phil dodged around him as he fell, planting one foot firmly on the ground before running his sword straight through Dream's chest, up through the underside of its ribcage and out its back through the third and fourth ribs.

There was silence for a moment.

Dream looked down at the sword, its head tilting on its axis.

Up close, Phil could hardly even comprehend its existence. How could something this unnatural be alive? How could it be anything more than a nightmare? But it bled all the same. Black tar began to seep out of the wound and down Phil's blade, falling to the snow in clumps. It was over before it even began. *Could it be that easy?*

Dream stared at the sword for only a moment before looking up at Phil, its hollow eyes making his thoughts cold and empty. It reached down, gripping the blade with its hand and holding it in place. Its carved out eyes met Phil's gaze, hollow and empty and yet somehow also captivating in a way Phil couldn't explain. He couldn't look away.

"Feels like we've done this before, huh?" Dream said.

When it spoke, it was as though the words were echoing inside his skull, bouncing around in a thousand tones and languages and volumes but still resulting in something recognizable, something disgustingly familiar. The smile carved into the skin of Dream's skull tightened, a crude excuse for a smile. Dream strengthened its grip on the sword. Phil jerked it back, but it remained lodged in Dream's ribcage, grinding against bone.

"But last time," Dream continued, leaning slowly forward, "We didn't really get to finish, did we?" Phil's gaze traveled to Dream's severed arm, thick black blood dripping slowly from the wound. He watched as the tarry substance clung to itself, clung to Dream's skin, shifting and solidifying until it was taking shape once again as the appendage that was once there to begin with, reforming itself like nothing had happened.

"Phil—!" Ranboo shouted, his voice scratchy, and Phil felt himself being yanked backwards, stumbling over the snow and out of the way as Dream lashed out at him. He felt the tip of one of its clawed fingers skim across his cheekbone. The icy air pricked against it as fresh blood fell in a thin trail down his cheek.

Ranboo kept his hand wrapped around Phil's arm, pulling him further back away from Dream. Phil stretched his arm out, blocking Ranboo from Dream and pushing him behind him. From the corner of his eye, he could see the skin on Ranboo's pale hand. It was blistered and irritated, iridescent purple blood welling up around his fingernails and the wrinkles of his knuckles. Phil ached to see his face, to see what the damage truly was, but he didn't dare take his eyes off of Dream.

In front of him, the creature tilted its head on its axis, peering at Phil and Ranboo and then at Techno when the man grunted, rising to his feet. Then, it looked down at the sword in its chest. It wrapped its long fingers around the hilt, running a thumb over the emerald set into the base. It touched it as though it were an ornament, something decorative, not something that was impaling it through the ribs.

“Honestly, I thought I’d have to work much harder for this,” Dream said. There was something sickly sweet in its voice, a childlike giddiness. “I thought you’d be so much more *stubborn*, and I mean, to be honest, I would have loved to watch you spiral into that awful paranoia a little longer,” it said, and it laughed, a light, bubbly laugh that made Phil’s stomach turn. “But this is fun, too.”

“You’d enjoy that, wouldn’t you?” Ranboo said bitterly. “Chipping away at me like you did to Karl? I’m not losing my mind again.” The word *again* burned in Phil’s mind.

“You’re right, I would have enjoyed it,” Dream said, almost giddily. “I was looking forward to it. I could have driven you *mad*. ”

Dream looked down, paused, and then wrenched the sword from its chest.

More of that same black tar fell to the ground, splattering across the snow, sizzling as it melted through. It fizzed as it came in contact with the grass underneath. Dream turned the sword over in its hand. The emerald in the hilt glimmered.

“It’s a lovely sword,” Dream said, its voice dripping with venom. “The emerald matches that axe, right?” Dream looked to Techno, who gripped his axe tighter in his hand. “How quaint. It’s the little things, I guess.”

Dream swung the sword abruptly, swiping it up towards Phil’s chin. Phil ducked back, pushing Ranboo further behind him. As he did, Techno dove forward, deflecting the blade with the curve of his axe. He knocked the sword’s trajectory off to the right before planting his foot and swinging hard up from below.

It was a swing that could have knocked the head off of a bull in one clean swipe, but Dream dodged back effortlessly, dancing out of the way with a haunting laugh. Tar dripped from its chest as it did, but Phil could see the wound already healing. The slash across its chest was as well, though slower. It steadily leaked small trails of inky blood that glimmered slightly in the moonlight. It didn’t close. Underneath the cut, there was only darkness. It was dark like the space between stars.

Could they even kill this thing? Ranboo seemed so sure, but maybe it was just the desperation, the *needing* it to be true that had made him certain. A bitterness grew in Phil's chest that he wished he could put down. They could have made it work. They were *making* it work. Now that was thrown away. What was even the point?

Dream tilted its head up, rolling its shoulders back. As it did, more static filled the air.

"Oh, I've waited so long for this." Dream said. "Do you have any idea how *good* it feels to be out of that place?"

"Don't get used to it," Techno grunted.

"And why's that?" Dream asked lowly. "You're gonna send me back? You little mortals are always so *sure* of yourself, aren't you? It's disgusting."

"You're going to die tonight," Ranboo said, stepping forward from behind Phil. Phil tried to pull him back, but he stood his ground. Dream snapped its head back down to look at him, Phil gripped Ranboo's arm like a vice. "I'll kill you myself—"

"*Ranboo*," Techno hissed over his shoulder, as though he was reprimanding a child. Phil could see more of Ranboo's body, now. His clothes were soaked with icy water, and the skin around his collar and sleeves looked like it had been carved into rather than burned. Trails of water streamed down his neck from his hair and it left trails of irritated skin, blistering and muddling with his blood and turning purple as it traveled down his neck and dripped onto his shirt. Phil felt sour.

Dream laughed, though, a crackling, light laugh.

"I died a thousand deaths in that place," Dream said, his voice low and bitter. "That *hell*." It tightened its grip on the sword, its bones creaking and cracking as it stepped forward. Phil stepped back again, pulling Ranboo with him. "Once for each of my brothers, and once more for each of my evils. I don't even remember what I did anymore, did you know that?"

“I’m sure you deserved it,” Ranboo said. Techno raised his axe slightly.

“Did I?” Dream demanded, straightening out so it was now towering over them even more. “Do you know how many of us there are down there in that Void? There were *thousands* of us, cast into the lowest pit of oblivion with no sign of light– what evil warrants *that* ?”

“What do you consider this, then?” Phil demanded, suddenly finding his voice. Anger boiled up in his chest. “You’re trying to kill a *child*– ”

“Not *just* a child,” Dream tutted, shrugging its boney shoulders. “I’m trying to kill *all* of you.”

“Well that makes it much better, doesn’t it?” Techno muttered.

“I don’t need to explain myself to the likes of you,” Dream said, its voice turning sour in Phil’s mind, leeching warmth from him like cold wind. “ *You* aren’t special,” it said, looking to Ranboo. “None of you are. This isn’t about *you* .” Dream stalked forward. Phil gripped the shard of Karl’s sword tightly in his hand, the only weapon he now had against this beast. “When we’re done, there’ll be nothing left of you miserable creatures.”

Ranboo moved before Phil could stop him. He lunged forward, dodging under the swing of Dream’s sword and lashing out with his hand to try to make a grab for the hilt of the blade. Dream pulled it out of the way, twisting to shove Ranboo to the ground by the shoulder with its other hand. It moved to thrust the sword down on top of him, but Ranboo rolled out of the way, leaving the blade to plunge into the snow where his body once lay.

In the moment that Dream paused to wrench the sword from the ground, Techno moved forward and swung his axe from the side. It lodged firmly into Dream’s shoulder with a dry crack, a noise that seemed to be swallowed up in the night.

Dream didn’t even flinch.

Techno didn't give it the chance to catch him off guard. He placed his boot against Dream's back, tugging the axe free and finding his footing once again. Dream turned slowly to face him, and a low buzz filled the air.

The static that Dream emanated felt like bugs crawling through Phil's skull. It wasn't the same familiar pop of released tension that Ranboo's little noises brought. It was pins and needles, scalding steam building under the surface, nails scratching against slate.

One moment Dream was staring down Techno, and the next Techno was sprawling backward, clutching his shoulder. Dream's claws glinted with blood. It felt like Phil had hardly blinked. He stepped back almost subconsciously, stunned by the speed at which Dream had moved, but almost as soon as he'd stepped back, his instincts began to kick in.

He felt naked without a weapon. Seeing Dream holding his sword made him itch. He held the shard of Karl's sword in his hand, adjusting his grip. It had a warmth to it that Phil hadn't taken note of until now, like it was alive somehow. He knew it must be the enchantment that thrummed through it, giving it that strange glow, but it was strange to feel in his hand, like it was lightweight and heavy at the same time. Even though it was broken, it still held power.

Phil tensed himself, holding his wings close to his body to keep them out of the way before jumping forward toward Dream. He swiped with the broken sword, but Dream moved out of the way without even looking at him, dodging to the side and whirling its sword toward Phil. He was ready, though, leaning back to dodge it before bringing the shard back up to carve a gash along Dream's ribcage.

Dream hissed, sending sparks through Phil's head. Phil brought the shard up to block whatever blow might be coming his way, but it never came. Instead, there was a blur of movement in front of him and suddenly Ranboo was on top of Dream.

They fought like animals.

Ranboo latched onto Dream's arm, digging his claws in deep and wrapping himself around the creature until he was hanging off of its back and pulling it to the ground. Dream bent backwards unnaturally far, stumbling back as Ranboo threw his weight to the side. It thrust

its chest forward, hauling Ranboo over its shoulder and tossing him to the ground, but Ranboo scrambled to find his footing quickly and leapt forward, ramming his head and shoulders into Dream's torso.

They tumbled to the ground, rolling around in a tangle of slashing claws and grappling hands until eventually Dream pulled itself to its feet and stumbled backwards. There were black flecks dotting the snow. Ranboo swung his arm around, aiming for Dream's head, but Dream caught his arm before it could make contact and held it fast.

"You remember this one, don't you?" Dream hissed, its voice almost deranged. It tensed its grip, and Ranboo's arm snapped. Just as easily as Ilya's had.

An inhuman howl filled the air, metallic and discordant. Ranboo screamed, and in the same breath he lurched forward and sank his teeth into Dream's forearm. Dream's static screech mixed in the air with Ranboo's wail. Phil could see black blood dripping from between Ranboo's teeth.

Dream seemed to shake with anger, jerking his arm to the side to release himself from Ranboo's grip, but Ranboo didn't let go. The static grew louder. It flung Phil's sword off to the side, sending it skittering through the snow faster than Phil's eyes could track. With its hand now free, it gripped Ranboo's face, its long fingers digging into the skin of his cheek and jaw, prying him off until finally enough skin had come off in Ranboo's mouth that his hold faltered just enough for Dream to shake him loose. It held its grip on Ranboo's head, its nails digging into Ranboo's temples and jaw, and Ranboo kicked and clawed at Dream's arm, his limbs flailing and his eyes screwed shut.

Phil stepped forward, but before he could move to attack he saw Techno rising to his feet, readying the sword shard in his hand. He wound his arm back and threw it hard.

It found its target, lodging deep in Dream's chest.

It jammed between the ribs on the left side of its body, hitting with such force it made him stumble backwards, dropping his grip on Ranboo as he did. It held its long, boney hand to the place where the shard stuck out. A strange reddish glow pulsed out from the spot, the same color as the shimmering blade, flickering through its veins. Dream looked at it, emanating a low gurgle of static.

The glimmer of light faded. Phil watched as the shard of the sword lost its shine, the enchantment fading and breaking away, finally worn out. When all the shimmer had left the blade, it began to crack. Little pieces fell away from the edges, crumbling to dust, until the whole piece shattered and fell to the snow in a fine black powder like soot. Dream caught some of it in its hand, letting it trickle between its fingers.

There was a long silence. Ranboo stepped back slowly, carefully, as though he was trying not to be seen somehow. Techno straightened up slowly. The expression on his face was angry, filled with more rage than Phil had seen his friend possess since they'd dealt with the Butcher Army. There was a wildness to it, a certain kind of fear, restrained but seeping through the cracks. Phil could see his hand shaking.

The wind seemed to come to a stop.

Black blood dripped in thick streams from Dream's chest. It hunched over, and blood fell into its hand alongside the dust from the shattered sword. It lifted its head slowly, its gaze locking onto Techno.

"Enough of this," it said, its voice so low Phil could hardly hear it. It sounded darker, now, like everything that had come before was some kind of game, a character, a charade of giddiness. It was a joy, before; a challenge. Now it had grown old, and Phil didn't know what that meant for them. He didn't want to know, but he was certain they were going to find out. The air felt heavy. Phil felt dread settle like a rock in his heart.

Dream went after Techno first. It moved fast, so fast Phil had hardly registered the action by the time it was on top of him. When it moved now, it was like it wasn't obeying the rules of the world, striding across the snow like it was walking between worlds. Phil's mind couldn't track it.

It struck Techno in the head with the back of its hand before Techno had a chance to even raise his axe to defend himself. He was thrown sideways by the force of it, the axe dropping from his hand as he crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

“ *No!* ” Ranboo screamed, his voice raw and cracking, and he took off running toward Dream where he stood over Techno’s still form. The shock of it finally wore off for Phil, the numbness of surprise morphing into a realization of what was happening, and when it did, he started running as well.

Ranboo stooped low as he approached, picking up the axe Techno had dropped. A memory flashed in Phils mind of Ranboo holding the axe in front of the burning mansion. Everything felt fake. That felt like a hundred years ago, and at the same time like it was yesterday.

Ranboo swung the axe hard, the head connecting with the back of Dream’s knee, making the creature buckle and fall to the ground. It whipped its head around, reaching for Ranboo with its boney claws. Ranboo rolled out of the way, casting a worried glance at Techno as he did. Phil lashed out with the broken sword once again, praying that just once he could catch Dream off guard, that he could make contact, aiming for its head, aiming for the kill.

Dream caught his hand, though, and before he could even think he was being thrown onto his back on the ground.

Phil felt something crack, the sound of it seeming to echo in his body, and the air left his lungs in one painful breath. He saw stars.

He couldn’t breathe in, coughing out what little oxygen he had left in stuttering gasps. Dream stood over him, its hollow, soulless eyes staring down at him as if to challenge him; *get up*, it taunted, *I dare you*. Phil tried to move, pushing aside the screaming pain that burned through his chest, but nothing more came of it than a groan, all the movement still shocked from his body. He tasted blood.

“Stop!” Ranboo shouted, his voice desperate, begging. In Phil’s blurred vision, he saw movement, chaotic movement, and he rolled over onto his side just as Dream picked Ranboo up by the throat and threw him across the snow like he was weightless, like he was nothing.

Dream tilted its head, its smile growing wider. Static crackled in Phil’s ears.

It straightened out, rolling its shoulders back, each vertebrae clicking against the next until it stood tall once more, silhouetted in darkness against the night sky. Dense black blood ran in

rivers down its skin, winding its way like tree roots down its arms and chest and trailing to the snowy ground where it dripped and fizzled away.

It glanced back down at Phil, then turned its head to Techno who still lay motionless in the snow, and then cracked its attention toward Ranboo.

No.

Phil rolled onto his side, clutching his ribs with one hand and propping himself up with the other, trying to force air into his lungs. Sharp, stabbing pain shot through his chest.

No, no, no .

There was nothing between them, now, nothing to block Dream's path, nothing to slow it down. He needed to move. He needed to stand. Beneath him, his arm shook under the weight of his body. The pain made him tremble, and he placed his forehead against the powdery snow.

Get up.

He tasted blood in his mouth when he stood.

Across the tundra, he saw Ranboo rising to his feet shakily, lifting his gaze to see Dream stalking towards him. He stumbled backwards, tripping over his own feet and falling to the ground, crawling backwards.

"Stop," he shouted again, his voice quaking.

Phil tried to fly, tried to beat his wings as hard as he could and lift himself off the ground, tried to run, but the pain that reverberated through his ribs took him to the ground against his will. It made him gag. He shoved himself to his feet, staggering sideways.

Dream walked to Ranboo, calmly, so disturbingly confident and assured.

He knelt slowly over the boy, pinned Ranboo to the ground, one hand on his chest shoulder, its knee digging into his other elbow and holding it against the snow. Ranboo clawed at Dream's arm with his free hand. Even from so far, Phil could see he was drawing blood, but Dream didn't seem to care. He wasn't phased in the slightest.

"Stop," he begged. "Please."

Phil forced himself to run, as best he could, one foot in front of the other. When he stumbled, when he fell, he pushed himself back up. He wouldn't let it win. He wouldn't let Ranboo die. He couldn't.

Phil heard a groan behind him as Techno roused. He turned over his shoulder, watching him look up blearily from the ground, his eyes finding Phil. His expression was confused and scared and dazed, and Phil had to turn away, guilt rising in his chest.

"It was a good effort," Dream said, its static voice sending a shiver down Phil's spine. It removed its grip from Ranboo's shoulder, moving it to grab his hand that was still desperately clawing at Dream's arm. "Entertaining, to say the least. But tiresome."

"I'm sorry," Ranboo said.

Phil knew it wasn't said for Dream. The apology was said for him. It was said for Techno.

It was said in lieu of a goodbye.

Ranboo kicked and struggled, opening his mouth only to release a gut wrenching wail that echoed across the tundra and made Phil groan as it pierced his ears. It wasn't just the usual crackling, piercing wail; this one was more. Layered underneath was a scream, an honest

scream, a human scream. Ranboo thrashed his head back and forth, pounded his feet against the snow, screamed a terrible, desperate scream –

The agony of it was knowing that there would never have been time.

The distance was too great between them, the snow too deep, the air too thin. There was not enough wind in the world to carry Phil to Ranboo's side fast enough, not enough time in the world to delay the inevitable a moment longer. That was what Karl had called it, wasn't it? *The inevitable*. This was what he meant. This was the fate he had wanted to spare Ranboo of, this was the torture that he knew awaited his boy when he had died.

If you could go back ...

"I wouldn't change a thing," Phil said.

There would never have been time. There was never enough to begin with.

Dream plunged its hand into Ranboo's chest with a crunch that Phil would never forget til death greeted him.

Ranboo's scream was cut short, the wail faltering into a silence that left the world feeling empty of all sound, cold and hollow. Phil couldn't make a sound. He froze in his tracks, mouth hanging open. He heard Techno cry out, let himself sink to his knees.

Dream pushed its claws in further, and Ranboo gasped, a whimpering, wet sound, his breath ragged on the way back out. Dream shifted position, taking one knee off of Ranboo's elbow and releasing his other arm. There was nothing he could do now to fight back, and Dream knew it. Ranboo brought his hand up to grasp at Dream weakly, wrapping his fingers around Dream's wrist.

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't fun," Dream said, leaning in.

As it drew closer, it tilted its head. With one boney finger of its other hand, it reached down, lifting up the chain that was around Ranboo's neck until the totem pendant was dangling in the air. With a pained noise, Ranboo lurched, grabbing onto it with his free hand.

"What a waste," Dream muttered. Ranboo held his grip on the totem. Phil could see his arm shaking, but he clung to the pendant desperately. "You might have been able to do it, you know," Dream continued. "Fend me off, keep me at bay a while with this thing... though even the power of the Totem God is limited." Dream dropped the chain, and Ranboo's hand fell to his chest unceremoniously. "I guess you'll never know."

Phil felt as though he was out of his own body, like his mind was a hundred feet above him watching this play out as a mere observer. *Move*, he wanted to scream at himself. *Fight*.

Ranboo cried out, a sharp and scratchy cry, as Dream shifted the hand in his chest. As it did, purple particles of light danced around them, but they fizzled out almost as quickly as they came.

"I hope your God *does* revive you," Dream said. It tensed its body. "That way I'll have the pleasure of killing you twice." It stood, wrenching the pearl free from Ranboo's chest.

Phil knew Ranboo was screaming, but he could hear only ringing in his ears. There was purple coating the snow, dripping from Ranboo's mouth, trailing in streams from Dream's hand. Dream now stood over Ranboo's body, and in its hand it held his core, his very being, his soul.

It was dark emerald green and teal blue, bouncing moonlight around inside of it and reflecting light like ocean waves onto the snow. It seemed to pulse like a second heart, beating and breathing in time with the world around it. It was sunlight and trees. It was fire and water. It dreamed and it created and it destroyed.

It called out to the void, and the universe spoke back; and the universe said *you are not alone*, and the universe said *you are the daylight, and you are the night*, and the universe said *I love you, because you are love*.

Wake up.

Then there was only gold, and light, and life.

Chapter End Notes

well. here we are. uh..... ehehe... oops. don't hate me. <3

thank you all for being patient with me while I wrote this bad boy. let me know what you think in the comments! I love hearing from all of you SO much you don't even know, it makes my whole day. my whole WEEK.

or if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

11/8 - planning out the ending!! workin hard :D

11/11 - ohohoho some of yall are gonna see some confirmation of the theories you've been leaving. Writing is underway!

11/15 - ok, possible update tonight or tomorrow :0 I'm aiming for tonight ...we shall see

Light

Chapter Summary

The world rang.

The air quaked in the aftershock. It flooded with light, with gold and glittering particles that swept out across the tundra like a wave on rocky shores. The surge hit Techno in the chest and poured air into his lungs like something else was breathing for him.

Techno could have called it a dream if he hadn't seen so much of what reality could offer.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: depictions of violence, blood

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Before there was the War, before there was enchanter, before human and beast and mob, Overworld and Nether, there was a beginning; and in this beginning was the End.

This was where life began, and life took its form in Undying, creating itself from the pulse that beat through the universe. There was nothing untouched by this Undying; nothing escaped this God. His gaze was what breathed energy into the End, sprouted chorus fruit and flowers from stone, built bodies around pearls of its power, raised cities from seeds.

This was what brought him joy; the act of creation. He built worlds, built homes, built creatures, built beauty. Life found its origins in the God, and the God found its origins in the End, and the End found its origins in life.

This was when new worlds were made.

The Overworld was his joy. It was a project of love, of knowledge, of experimentation. It was life that could sustain itself, that could be created from itself, that could thrive of its own force. The Overworld had its own pulse, its own soul. It had its own fate. It was pride, and it was success where other worlds had failed, where other worlds had descended into fire and death. He gifted this world miracles. He gave it guidance. He gave it knowledge. He gave it freedom.

He would not let this world fail; he plucked the weeds of evil and chaos before they bloomed and cast them into the dark, where they would be abandoned. Into the Void he first cast the greedy, the oppressors, the kings who waged wars for control, and the scholars who hoarded knowledge for power.

But this was not enough. Chaos was not solely contained within dictators and tyrants.

It was in power and pride and envy and greed. It existed under the skin. It was a festering wound, and if it was not cast out when it began to rear its head, it would transform into evil. So the God became paranoid and fearful of all that *was* and all that would *become* chaos, and he cast it out without trial or testimony.

He would not let this world fail.

This fear would become his downfall. The Void did not destroy chaos; it merely destroyed the vessel. That chaos remained in withered bodies that knew only a desire for revenge, minds chipped away by the cold of darkness until eventually their hatred grew so strong it could not be contained. Then there was War; and in war, there was death; and in death, there was shame.

And so in the aftermath of his blindness and his naivete, in the death of his creation, his love, his world, he abandoned his name, cursed himself as Foolish where he once was God, and retreated from this realm as a wolf with its tail between its legs to a home where none could touch him and where he could touch nothing, where none could touch that chaos and where that chaos could touch nothing. This was their oblivion. This was their End.

And so it was, and would be, from then and to the end of time; until it wasn't.

Foolish felt it when it happened. It wasn't a breach; it was little more than a crack opened up, if that. It was nothing. It was just life, human life, touching some long abandoned connection to the End, but that was all it took. The Dreamon's body remained in the Void; it wasn't enough to bring him to the Overworld, not fully, but its mind travelled far. Foolish could feel that it remained, physically, in this banishment. But its mind slipped through that crack, and its mind was where its power lay. Its mind was what gave it control.

He could do nothing to stop it. The crack had opened and closed so quickly, so suddenly, so impossibly, and when Dream slipped through, it sealed behind him. Foolish could only watch the chaos slowly unfold from there.

He watched as it traveled, as it killed, as it gathered information. It sought a way out, a way to bring its body from the Void, and to bring the others along with it. It sought a way to take its revenge. It sought escape. For that, it needed a pearl.

And for a pearl, it needed a child: a very particular child, one who should never have existed, one who only lived by mere chance, by circumstance. And so Dream did what the Dreamons did best; it tortured him. It drove him mad. It drove him to the only end he could see. It was the only end that was possible, really. Foolish knew it. Once Dream had wormed its way into the Overworld, it would find what it wanted one way or another.

But it did not know what Foolish knew; the child did not know what Foolish knew, and the phantom did not know what Foolish knew, and the piglin did not know what Foolish knew. The Eye was the Dreamon's path to the Overworld, but the Totem was the God's path.

The child traded his life, and in doing so, the path was open again.

It had been a long time since Foolish had felt the air of the Overworld.

It was cold here. It was dark, but the light of the moon bounced off of the snow below him. He could see the tops of dark green trees, a frozen lake that disappeared into the horizon, tundra that stretched out for miles. It sparkled with ice and light. He had nearly forgotten the true beauty of this world. Towering over it now, he remembered. It had brought such joy when he created it. Now it was a cruel reminder.

Below him, he saw the scene unfold. In the frozen lake, there was a hole; in the snow, there was blood; in the Dreamon's hand, there was a pearl, and at its feet, there was a child. Or, there was the body of a child. And in the eyes of the phantom and the piglin who looked on, there was agony.

Foolish fixed his gaze on the Dreamon. He forced himself to behold what he had created; a husk, an embodiment of chaos. It was the Void that had whittled away at its soul, but it was Foolish who cast it into the Void. It was Foolish who allowed this to happen. It was Foolish who brought this torture onto the world, and now it was Foolish who would destroy it.

There was nothing joyful in destruction; he was a builder, a creator, a giver of life. He couldn't bring himself to bring death before, but now he had learned. Now, he would not allow this creature to hold such power over him. Anger overcame him. Anger at himself, at this thing. Anger at his creation. Anger that this had haunted him for so long.

He would be done with it now.

When he reached down, he saw the fear in Dream's eyes. He saw the rage and the hatred and the resentment, but over it all, he saw the fear. He saw its realization of its fate. Foolish closed his hands around this creature and poured the pulse of life into its empty body. He filled it with blood; he gave it a heart; he gave it muscle and nerves, a soul, a mind; he made it man, clothed its body, made its eyes see; he made it alive; he made it mortal; he made it destructible.

But he was not the one who destroyed.

When the dust settled and the anger that blinded him faded into clarity, he saw a new scene: he saw the Dreamon pinned to the ground, he saw the shattered remains of an enchanted sword plunged into its chest, and he saw the phantom kneeling over it, the hilt of the blade clutched in his hands.

Dream died silently. It died human. It died at the hands of a mortal, not a God.

The phantom stood, blood on his hands, and looked up at Foolish. The light of his being reflected in the phantom's eyes, and along with it, there was something Foolish did not expect to see.

There was wrath.

"Bring him back," the phantom said. It was a demand. An order. This mortal stood tall before a God and it did not ask; it did not beg; it did not plead. It commanded. "*Bring him back.*"

Techno had never travelled by ship before. The idea of it seemed generally appalling; to be out on open water with no land in sight, no earth beneath his feet, just endless expanses of rocking waves and tumultuous currents. Techno had seen the ocean. He'd seen the strength with which the water crashed onto rocky shores. Phil had offered to teach him to swim once or twice, but Techno did not intend to set foot into any body of water he couldn't see the bottom of.

But he imagined this must be what sailing felt like.

The world rocked beneath him, tilting from side to side. Nothing was steady; his sight was a cloud of color and shape and light, morphing in and out of familiar forms, and when he tried to stand, it was as though something was pulling him back to the ground.

He could see light.

There was something massive towering in front of him, something in the shape of a man but made fully from glimmering gold with bright emerald green eyes. It stood taller than any tree in any forest, a mountain of a being, staring down at the world with an expressionless face.

Techno's steps faltered when he saw it. It had appeared in a flash of light so bright he wondered if he had gone blind, and now the world thrummed with energy and life. The air

around him seemed to vibrate as the being looked down on them, and Techno knew what it was; this was the Totem God. This was its true form.

He shoved himself forward through the snow, into this new light. He watched as it glared down at the scene beneath it, at the Dreamon that now held Ranboo's pearl in its hand, at the boy who lay at its feet, at Phil who now stared motionless at the God above him. He felt its energy shift and change, the air feeling dense, heavy with anger.

The God stared down, its sights set on Dream, and Dream glared up at it with equal disdain. But it wasted no time. Techno hardly had a moment to understand what he was seeing before the God reached down, its great hands surging toward Dream and Ranboo from either side, until it clapped its heavy palms around them with a sound that could make thunder seem silent.

The world rang.

The air quaked in the aftershock. It flooded with light, with gold and glittering particles that swept out across the tundra like a wave on rocky shores. The surge hit Techno in the chest and poured air into his lungs like something else was breathing for him.

Techno could have called it a dream if he hadn't seen so much of what reality could offer.

There was grass. Green grass. Grass where there should have been snow and ice, grass that sprouted flowers, pink and red and yellow and white, grass that shone with dew and shimmered with sunlight cast down from the God's body.

In the grass, there was a man. He was no one. He was anyone. He was tall, wearing simple clothes, with dirty blonde hair, and in his hand, he held a pearl— or he didn't. He held what remained of a pearl. Shattered. Shards of emerald green and dark teal fell from between his fingers.

The God stared down at him once more, a devil now made mortal, made man.

Dream dropped the remains of the pearl. Blood dripped from his hand. He tilted his head up to meet his fate at the hands of his creator, to look death in the eye as it came for him, to show the world his rage one last time.

Phil got to him first.

Techno had hardly seen him cross the distance between them, but as the God began to reach toward Dream once more, he was there, plunging the shattered hilt of the enchanted blade into Dream's throat.

Techno expected hell. He expected Dream to cry out, to scream, to make their ears bleed with the sound of it. He expected black smoke to rise from his eyes and mouth, for him to dissolve into tar, to coat the world in darkness.

But Dream died quietly. He died in silence. He died with blood on his tongue and breath lost on mortal lungs. He died with his eyes closed. He died, and he fell to the ground with nothing more than a thud.

And Ranboo lay there next to him, just as still, just as unmoving, just as cold. Techno moved as though someone else was pulling his strings.

"Bring him back," Phil said. His voice penetrated the cloud of Techno's thoughts with the power it commanded.

Phil stood, staring up at the God that towered before him. It was easily twice as tall as the cabins, more perhaps, and when Phil spoke it turned its head to look at him. It cast sparkling waves of light down on him. Phil didn't waver. He let his wings unfurl slightly behind him, straightened his spine, clenched his fists.

"Bring him back," Phil demanded again.

Techno stumbled in the snow, finally finding himself at Phil's side but with little notion of exactly how he'd found himself there. Time seemed to be moving out of order. The space between them was so small, and yet it was infinite. He let the swaying of the world take him to his knees, and in his arms, he found himself cradling a body.

The God knelt.

Where it's knee touched the ground, the snow melted. Green grass sprouted, long tall strands, wildflowers sparkling with light. Phil stepped back with one foot, but remained where he was, shoulders squared. His eyes were red and puffy.

"He is free, now," the God said.

It's voice was soft and melodic, gentle.

Techno balled his fists into the fabric of Ranboo's torn shirt, soaked in purple blood. He couldn't look at the boy's face. He couldn't bring himself to witness the unseeing eyes, the paled, cold skin, the expressionless mask that once bore life.

"No," Phil said. "He's *dead*." His voice wavered. It was raw, so raw it sounded painful.

Techno felt a sharpness at the back of his throat. The air that surrounded him here was slowly clearing his head, the warmth drawing out the numbness in his chest and pulling the fog from his eyes. With it came a sinking horror that made his tongue feel heavy and his stomach twist in knots.

He's not dead. He can't be dead. Techno placed his hand over the wound on Ranboo's chest as though it would undo the damage, or fill the hole where the pearl once was. He reached out, picking up pieces of the shattered emerald-green gem from the ground, and he pressed it against Ranboo's unmoving chest, his hands shaking. The shards dug into the skin of his palm. He gripped them hard enough to make himself bleed, but he did not feel the cuts forming.

“He is at peace. His soul travels the End, free from this tortured world–” the God said, but Phil’s feathers trembled and spread wide as he interrupted.

“He was tortured because of *you!*” he shouted. There was so much in his voice; pain and rage and desperation, and now it had a focus; it had a target. “Because of *your* world, *your* mistakes! Dream was only alive because of you–”

“*You are only alive because of me,*” the God said, its voice carrying across the tundra.

“You could have stopped this,” Phil said, his voice low and angry.

“You don’t understand,” the God said, shaking his head. *“This world was sealed. It was out of my reach. It should have remained that way, until the end of time.”*

“But you’re here now,” Phil said.

“Yes,” the God responded. *“Your enderling traded his life to bring me here. And now, I’ll return. This world has been returned to balance,”* the God said. Techno ground his teeth. He rested the shattered pearl against Ranboo’s chest, standing slowly. The world tilted beneath him, but he refused to fall.

“This is balance?” Techno asked, his voice low and quiet in disbelief. “This...”

“Yes,” the God said simply. Techno’s shoulders shook. *“It is. The Dreamon is gone, the Void remains sealed.”*

“Ranboo is dead! A child is *dead!*” Phil said. Techno flinched at the word.

“He never should have lived,” the God said, and the indifference in his voice made Techno see red.

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Techno said. “Don’t you *dare*. ” The God rose to his feet. The air began to feel heavy.

“I did all I could to prevent this,” he said. *“But my mistakes never fail to haunt me.”* Techno didn’t care anymore. He didn’t care that this was a God. He didn’t care that this being towered over him like a great sycamore, that it had created this world, that it could cast him aside with little more than a blink of its emerald eyes.

“You would punish him for that, then? For existing?” Techno demanded.

“This is not punishment, little piglin,” the God said. *“The enderling is born from my End, and he now returns.”*

“He has a name,” Techno said.

“As did I, once. As did every creature the Dreamons slew. It is all forgotten now, as you will be, as this world will be. As it was meant to be.”

“Not to us,” Phil said. “He won’t be forgotten to us.”

“He is at peace,” the God insisted, and Techno felt himself crack.

“He could be at peace *here* ,” Techno shouted. “He could be happy! He *was* happy! He was *loved*–” the world spun around him, and he found himself sinking to his knees, his words failing, just as everything else had failed. They’d failed. He rested his fingers against the back of Ranboo’s cold hand and felt all the energy and rage and pain swirl inside him like a storm. “Please,” he said, staring down at the lush green grass under his knees. It was so soft. “He was happy. He could have been happy.”

“You would have me pull him from rest to live in this forsaken world?” The God asked.

“I would have you bring him *home*,” Techno said, looking up at the God who stood before him. If this was a prayer, so be it. He would pray. He would beg, and he would plead, and he would pray. “Please.”

“Just give him a chance,” Phil said. “Give him a chance at life. One more chance. You won’t return to this world either way, so just... what’s one life? What’s one life to a god?” The great being looked down on them, and Techno could swear he saw sadness in his eyes.

“I’m not a god anymore,” he said. *“I’m a fool.”* The word bounced off of the trees, reaching to the sky; *Foolish*.

“Then make one more mistake,” Phil said quietly. “Just bring him back.” Foolish sighed, and with the breath, wind blew through the tundra. It made the sparkling gold in the air swirl and dance.

“I cannot force a soul to return to its body if it doesn’t want to,” he said. *“And I have not once encountered a soul who did not choose peace. The miracle of life is nothing once you’ve known the touch of the End.”* Foolish leaned down, staring into Phil and Techno’s eyes with a gaze like fire itself. *“Are you so sure he will come when you call?”*

“He...” Phil began, but trailed off. Would he? Ranboo hadn’t known peace in so long. He had no guarantee for peace now. This would haunt him. It would haunt all of them.

“He has already lived an infinity in the End,” Foolish said.

“Then let it be his choice,” Techno said. “Let him decide.”

“And you can live with the aftermath, then? You can live with knowing his inevitable choice?” Foolish said.

“I’m sick of that word,” Techno mumbled. “Inevitable. Just let him choose,” he said. *You’ll see*, he thought. *He’ll come back. He has to come back.* Foolish stared down at him. Its golden face was unreadable. Eventually, it pulled its shoulders back, kneeling down in front of Phil and Techno.

“You mortals are funny creatures,” Foolish said. “You’ve never failed to confuse me. Here you stand before a god, with a world of possibilities to request of me, and you ask for anything but peace.” He sighed a low, long sigh.

Techno ran his fingers over the skin on Ranboo’s hand. It felt fake, cold, unfamiliar.

He hated it.

“So be it,” Foolish said. He reached down, extending his arm, then his hand, then his finger. Techno hunched his shoulders, shying away almost involuntarily, as though some part of him knew that this was a power he shouldn’t have ever beheld.

Foolish reached past Techno, his hand hovering over Ranboo’s still body. The air felt like it was trembling, swirling like a tempest and yet also still like it wasn’t there at all. Techno felt like he couldn’t breathe. Light danced in front of his eyes, the same light that had shown when Dream was made human again, blinding and penetrating every shadow of the world. He felt the light in his mind and in his bones, making him feel light and clear.

As soon as Foolish rested his hand on Ranboo’s chest, Techno’s ears rang with a sound like striking metal. The God kneeling before him crumbled, its golden body disintegrating into dust that flowed to the ground like rushing water. It pooled on the snow, melting through the tundra ice and sprouting flowers and grass beneath it. The air felt warm.

When the dust cleared, there was only the three of them; Phil, Techno, and Ranboo—

But Ranboo was still. Motionless, cold.

He lay on the ground, nothing more than a body, now, a shell. There was no breath in his lungs, no color returning to his face. His chest remained an open cavity where life once was. And Techno finally, *finally* looked at his face, and he saw death there. He saw eyes that were glassy and faded, skin pale and flat and faded, flecked with burns and dotted with scars that told only a story of torment.

Techno shifted where he knelt, facing Ranboo fully. He placed his hands on the boy, one on his arm, the other on his shoulder, and he shook him gently. Ranboo didn't stir. And how could he? The injuries he still maintained were impossible to wake from. How could a soul return to this body? How could there be life?

"Phil," Techno said, not sure what he was asking for, nor what Phil could possibly do. He heard footsteps behind him, soft in the new grass. There was a hand on his shoulder. Phil knelt down beside him. "Phil, he's not..."

"Just— give it a moment," Phil said quietly. There was a breeze in the air. It smelled like pollen and fresh water. "Maybe... maybe it takes a moment."

"Foolish said—" Techno said, but trailed off. "What if... what if he doesn't—"

"He will," Phil said. He spoke with faux confidence, a performance of certainty. Techno could tell. He could always tell.

The moments that followed felt like an eternity. Foolish said Ranboo had already lived an infinity in the End; Techno imagined that this is what that must feel like. Every second stretched on within itself like an eternity contained in a single breath.

The soil beneath the grass was damp. Water seeped into Techno's pants. His body ached. His shoulder throbbed to the beat of his pulse, and though his head had slowly cleared, he could feel the tightness of swelling growing steadily at his temple. Every bone in his body was weighted with exhaustion, but despite it all, he was wound tight, tense, his body taught like the wire on a crossbow.

With each second that passed, Techno felt more and more sick to his stomach. He couldn't look at Ranboo like this. It made his chest ache.

"I can't do this again, Phil," Techno said quietly, so quietly he almost wondered if he'd said it at all. But Phil just squeezed Techno's shoulder lightly, and Techno gripped Ranboo's shoulder a little tighter, and the world held its breath.

Techno stared at Ranboo's chest. He couldn't purge the memory from his mind, the image of Dream plunging its hand into Ranboo's body etched behind his eyes, how Dream had pulled the pearl out like it was nothing, like he wasn't ripping free the boy's heart and soul, so easily, so effortlessly, that cruel smile lingering on his face.

And now Dream's body was as still as Ranboo's – a shell, dead. Truly dead.

But there was a glimmer of gold in Ranboo's blood.

Techno hardly noticed it at first. At first, it was leftover dust, the remains of the God still fading from the world; but it wasn't. It grew slowly, spreading, starting at the edges of the wound in Ranboo's chest and traveling like ice spreading over water. It spiderwebbed, tiny threads of light stretching out and joining each other. It looked almost like the tendrils of plants reaching out for sunlight.

They connected with each other slowly, stitching together. The gold spread until it filled the cavity of Ranboo's chest and made light shine out in rays from under his ribs, until it replaced the blood that had seeped into the grass, until it made the burns on his face shimmer and the scars shine with light like tiny stars dotting his skin.

Techno reached out blindly, gripping Phil's forearm. It seemed for the tenth time today, words failed him.

The threads of light pulled together, wrapping around each other like twine and drawing the wound on Ranboo's chest closed. It was like watching new life form from nothing, like watching fabric mend itself with no needle or thread to guide it. Ranboo's body mended itself from the inside out until all that was left of the massive chasm in his chest was a thick, jagged

scar of gold. The tear tracks that had burned down his face were replaced with shimmering light.

Eventually, his body stilled once more; the gold ceased to spread, already replacing each drop of purple blood, and there was no more wound to seal shut. And again, Ranboo lay motionless. Techno didn't even dare breathe. There was life thrumming through Ranboo's veins, life returned to him by the God of Undying; all Ranboo needed to do now was take it, to take himself back, to come home. *Please*, Techno begged whoever or whatever may have been listening, *just come home*.

He could feel his heart beating in his ears, slowly, like time was crawling by slower than it ever had before. It thudded hard, so hard he could feel it in his throat and in his fingertips. It signaled each passing moment.

T hump.

Thump.

Thump.

Ranboo's chest lurched.

Light poured from the boy's mouth as though he'd drowned in liquid gold, expelling itself from his lungs in a steady stream of shimmering blood made new. Techno lunged forward, lifting Ranboo's shoulder's from the ground and propping him upright as more fell from his mouth like water and from his eyes like tears, cascading over his body and onto the ground. Ranboo coughed and sputtered, his eyes screwed shut, and his whole body was tense and trembling.

And then finally, he took a breath, a deep, gasping breath of warm, crisp air. Techno could hear it clawing its way into his lungs, scratching down his throat like it was nails and sawdust, but it was a breath nonetheless. It was a breath. It was life.

It was *life* .

Ranboo retched up more of that gold blood. It ran down his chin and onto his shirt, but it seemed to shine and send embers of light into the air. As he did, he reached out, grasping for something to hold onto, anything to give him balance, to ground him, to hold him to this world. Techno took his hand. He held it, and it was warm, and it felt real. It felt familiar, it felt so familiar, the soft skin dotted with tiny scars now made gold, and it felt alive with a pulse and with blood running through the veins.

He held Ranboo, and Ranboo was warm. And he felt real. And he felt like home.

Techno heard Phil say something, but he couldn't make out the words, and then Phil was wrapping his arms around both of them, stretching his wings up and around their shoulders like a shield from a world that had already given up trying to torment them. There was nothing to shield them from now; the sun began to peek over the horizon, sending rays of orange and red and purple across the sky, and the air was weightless and warm, and under them there was grass so lush Techno wondered if it was even possible for something so green to exist.

But Phil shielded them anyway, and held them close, and Ranboo's stuttering, gasping breaths were the only sound that mattered here in this little huddle of sanctuary.

They felt a noise, then, Phil and Techno both— like cracking a knuckle, tucked in the back of their minds. Techno couldn't help but smile. Despite everything, joy bubbled up in his chest and came out somewhere between a laugh and a sob. His cheeks were wet.

He tried to steady his breathing, to settle the half-laugh, half-cry that still shook his chest. He placed his hands on Ranboo's shoulders, pushing him back gently, slowly, until they were kneeling in front of each other. His hands supported Ranboo's weight, and the boy leaned into him with his head bowed. Techno felt another little chirp crackle through his mind, and he smiled again.

What a strange thing to do, now; smile. It was almost like he couldn't hold it in, like that gold light had seeped into his soul and there was a relief he hadn't felt in years thrumming in his veins.

Phil reached forward, pushing Ranboo's hair out of his eyes. It had gotten so long, now. It brushed against his nose at the front and touched his shoulders at the sides. The burns and blisters that had covered Ranboo's skin were now gone, replaced with shining patches of gold. Tracks of tears ran down his cheeks, but they didn't burn or eat away at his skin; they were gold, too, gliding across his skin harmlessly.

He could cry, now, Techno realized. He could finally cry.

"Ranboo?" Phil said, his voice low and gentle and full of care.

Ranboo warbled softly. Phil pushed his hair back further, lifting his head slightly from its bowed position. Ranboo's eyes were dazed, his pupils blown wide, and he blinked slowly, like a child being roused from sleep, until finally his gaze found its way up to Phil and Techno. His eyes shook slightly from side to side.

"Hey, mate," Phil said. His voice cracked slightly when he spoke. Ranboo breathed out and chirped quietly. His mouth hung slightly open, and he still sounded like he was trying to catch his breath. Techno didn't know what to do other than simply hold him upright.

He wanted to shake him. He wanted to ask if this was real, if this was him, if it was over. He wanted to ask *why*. He wanted to tell him he was sorry, or to tell him it was okay, or to tell him it was over. It was over.

"Dream is dead," Techno said, almost involuntarily, as though his subconscious knew exactly what Ranboo wanted to hear even if his thoughts hadn't caught up yet. Ranboo blinked at him, holding his gaze with an exhausted attempt at focus. There was an intensity behind his eyes, and then there was disbelief.

Techno turned his head, looking over to where Dream's body lay.

He looked so human. He was nothing more than a man, normal, average, someone who Techno could have seen a hundred times and never remembered his face or his name. What

kind of person had he been? What could he have done that was so evil to warrant this fate? How many people had Dream killed in his rampage to free the dreamons from the void? There were only guesses, only unanswered questions now. Dream, once an unholy creature, a being withered away by the Void, was now nothing more than another body to be buried in this world.

Ranboo looked, too. The boy stared at the body that lay in the grass, at the dirty blonde hair that shifted in the breeze, at the blood soaked tunic that was draped over an unmoving chest. Dream was not all powerful anymore; it was not a god, or a devil; it was not immortal; it was not divine; it was human. And it was dead.

“It’s dead,” Ranboo said. His voice was quiet, hardly more than a breath, a whisper of words. “He... he’s really dead.” Techno nodded, turning back to Ranboo. Ranboo looked down, though, not meeting his gaze. Gold tears traced their way down his cheeks and fell from his chin onto the grass below. “I had to do it,” he whispered.

Techno felt something bitter inside of him. There was so much guilt in Ranboo’s voice. He knew what he’d done, what he’d brought on. Now, in the aftermath, he didn’t ask for forgiveness— only understanding.

Techno didn’t understand.

But Ranboo’s eyes had closed, and his head tilted forward, and he slumped to the side until Phil caught him and lowered him slowly to the ground. Some unconscious part of Ranboo’s mind still clung to the world, though, his hand wrapped loosely around Techno’s forearm even as he lay asleep with his head in Phil’s lap. The grass around his body seemed to cling to him, and the wildflowers stretched toward him as though he was the sun, and the breeze seemed to rise and fall with his chest. Phil carded a hand gently through Ranboo’s hair. It was still damp with lake water. Phil let his wings drape across the grass, his breathing strained. He held one hand across his ribcage.

Techno lifted his eyes to the sky, watching the purples and blues and blacks of the night fade away in a flood of orange and yellow. It seemed impossible for a new day to begin in the aftermath of all that had happened, but the sun rose despite it all. It felt like if they moved from this spot, it would all be undone. It would all turn out to be a dream. The sun would rise, and with it, everything would fade. Techno watched and held his breath.

But the sun rose, and nothing changed, and nothing faded away. There was still blood and breath and life flowing through Ranboo's body. Dream still lay cold and motionless. Slowly, the world woke up, the same as it had always been and changed beyond recognition.

Chapter End Notes

whelp. i have no idea what to say. this chapter was such a long time coming. wild.

Let me know what you thought? I'm sure you'll all have a lot of keyboard smashes to throw my way :) i welcome it all.

Oh, and, uh, im adding a chapter. 31 babee. u cant get rid of me that easily. Ive got too much to say >:)

if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

11/20 - sorry for the later update than usual! I'm working on the next chapter!! im about 2k words in right now :) im still in shock there's only 3 chapters left. wild. holy cow. lets get this bread.

11/21 – plot twist, i got so much motivation to write the next chapter that its gonna come out tonight HAHAHAHAH :D

To Be More

Chapter Summary

This was where he was meant to be, where he was always meant to be. This was where life began, where life was created, this was where worlds formed and reformed and recreated their own creations, this was where gods and men wandered and wept and fell to their knees under the darkness of the void, where beauty burned bright in eyes never meant to behold it.

It was home.

It was meant to be home.

It had to be home.

What else could it be?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The air was warm. It flowed in soft currents past his arms and legs and face, drifting aimlessly. There was no direction, no above or below, no surface, nowhere to go. There was no self, no body, nothing but that warmth and idle stream of wandering wind. It was nothingness.

It was peace.

He opened his eyes and saw home.

The sky was black here, black like no darkness could ever be, a night with no stars and no moon. It was a nothingness that brought serenity; there was nothing to see, nothing to focus on. A mind could drift here. It could drift and float and remain and dissolve, nothing to anchor it or hold it steady, nothing to weigh it down.

Here, there was stone. There was pale stone the color of sand, and there were trees that reached up with long fingers of purple and white, trees that bloomed with flowers and fruit. There were cities here, floating cities upon floating islands.

He could see to the horizon. He could see beyond the horizon. Here, there was no distance. There was no end to the world and no beginning to time. He could stare into the void of space and see it stare back, and it was warm, it was darkness that embraced and that held, and it was beauty.

It was beauty, because how could beauty anything else be? How could there be worlds other than this, homes other than this? How could there be life that wasn't here, life that wasn't so perfectly contained, so perfectly held in space and time and void, life that wasn't suspended so timelessly.

And here, there was life. Oh, there was *life*. He could feel it thrumming like a pulse under his feet, like lightning crackling through the air. It made him feel clear. It made the world feel clear.

It was home.

It was meant to be home.

How could it be anything but home? This was where he was meant to be, where he was always meant to be. This was where life began, where life was created, this was where worlds formed and reformed and recreated their own creations, this was where gods and men wandered and wept and fell to their knees under the darkness of the void, where beauty burned bright in eyes never meant to behold it.

It was home.

It was meant to be home.

It had to be home.

What else could it be? There was nothing beyond this. Nothing more than this. Nothing to forget or remember, nothing to forgive, nothing to fill the space that ached in his chest. Why did it ache? Time did not pass here, so why did it hurt more with each passing moment? There was no moment to pass. There was eternity, infinity, nothingness, so why did it hurt? Why was there longing?

It was meant to be home, but it wasn't.

There was no time here, but there was. Eternity was nothing without love. Peace was nothing without love. He longed for it.

This place contained life. It contained beauty. It held it in its core, and it meant nothing. Slowly, it meant less and less and less until the nothing became so unbearable he wanted to scream, but sound here was nothing as well, and nothing was nothing, and it was all so much nothing that it hurt to look. He had to look. There was no choice but to look. No choice but to live, to be out of life, to be empty.

He longed for home.

He was nothing here. He longed to be something. He longed for something to be; a friend, a son, alive, *please*, he begged, *please*. *I want to go home*.

But he was home. This was home.

It's not, it's not.

But it is. You just haven't seen yet, you haven't known. See? This world is where you belong. See this life that surrounds you, see? This is the answer? This is all. This is everything. This is you.

It's not. I was more. I was more than this.

More than this? There is nothing more than this. This is the End. You must see.

I can be more. I can be loved.

This place contains everything. It contains you. It contains love.

It contains love, but it doesn't love.

You want more.

I want what I had.

What you had? You had what all in that world had; you had pain. You had torment, and you had madness, and you had fear. You had so much fear.

I did.

So why?

Why?

Yes. Why?

Tell me why? Please. Please tell me why?

I don't understand. Please. I don't understand.

Why?

Waking up felt warm.

There was a familiarity to this. He'd done this before, hadn't he? He must have. There was heat against his eyelids, heat that felt sweet and heavy. He felt it prickle against his skin, travel into his lungs, swirl in his chest.

Waking up felt soft like wool, blurred like watching the world through an iced over window, dense like a sinking stone. It felt alive, but the pulse was not in the world, or in the air, or in the sky; it was in him, in his heart and his ears and behind his eyes. For once, he was only himself; he was not the world, not the universe; he was not love or life; there was a line where his body ended, a line that was not blurred or broken.

He was himself. He was *only* him. Only Ranboo.

And he was home.

When Ranboo opened his eyes, he saw gold. He *was* gold. There were little flecks on his arms and the back of his hands where he remembered there were once scars and burns and blisters. There was gold running in a thick line across one palm. The other arm was wrapped in a splint, bandaged between two smooth pieces of wood. There was gold under his skin and in his veins, and all at once, he felt more than warmth. He felt everything.

He bolted upright so fast the world spun around him, air punching into his lungs. He ached. He felt it everywhere, in his skull, in his bones, in his heart, but there was a numbness there too, right in the very center of his chest. It felt empty, like something was missing. And that numbness ached too.

Ranboo blinked, forcing the blurriness from his eyes.

Wake up, he urged himself. The thought echoed in his head, and with it came clarity that washed over him like water.

He was himself. He was only himself. There was no one else, only his own thoughts, his own voice, just *him*.

“Ranboo?”

There was a hand against his cheek, a soft palm dotted with calloused roughness. It skimmed across his jaw and rested against the back of his neck, and then he saw eyes. Blue eyes. Familiar eyes. *Phil*. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. A chirp warbled out from the back of his throat. Phil smiled.

He looked so tired.

There was a thin pink line on his cheek just below his right eye, jagged but healing, and he held himself cautiously, tension held tight in his shoulders and chest. There were bags under his eyes. Ranboo could see scratch marks peeking up over the collar of his shirt.

“Hey,” Phil said quietly.

Ranboo inhaled in slowly, feeling the air hit the bottom of his lungs, and despite the sharpness that came with it, the breath felt good.

There was relief in that breath; and then there was realization, understanding, things processed so quickly and viscerally it made his teeth chatter. And there was guilt, guilt that made his stomach twist.

He was alive.

He was alive, he was really alive, but behind his eyes he couldn't stop seeing it now that he'd remembered; Dream standing over him, the darkness in those eyes, the smile that never faded; he felt Dream's claws in his chest, felt that pull in his very core, he heard the crack, saw the light, saw the Void and the End, lived a lifetime, an eternity, an infinity, and now he was alive, he was alive, blood rushing through his veins and a pulse thudding in his ears and skin that felt warmth and touch and it was all too much—

Phil pulled him forward into his arms, and everything came to a halt.

"It's alright, mate," Phil said. "Breathe."

It was an easy instruction. He breathed.

"There you go."

He let himself stay there, following that one instruction over and over again, *breathe*, waiting for it to become natural again.

He could feel that something had changed, now. Something irreversible. He was something that was now *off*, something not meant to be here, something impossible. This was impossible. This was all impossible. How could anything be the same?

Would they forgive him? He wanted to beg, to explain himself, to say he was sorry— but was he? Was he really sorry? He had to do it. He had to. He couldn't live with that fear, with that paranoia, knowing there was something evil inside of him that was waiting to eat him alive.

And now Dream was dead. He was dead, truly dead. Ranboo had seen those blank, unknowing eyes, human eyes, and he was dead.

He was free.

“Easy, son,” Phil said. His voice rumbled in his chest. “It’s alright. You’re okay.” He was okay. He was okay. He was...

“A- are you—” Ranboo stammered, pulling his head away from Phil’s chest. When he blinked, he saw gold. His voice sounded awful, and his breath hitched. “Is Techno—”

“I’m right here, kid,” Techno said. Ranboo turned to his left, blinking dancing lights out of his eyes. Techno was walking toward him from Phil’s kitchen, a clay mug in his hand, and he was real, and he was alive. Why did that feel so temporary? He felt like if he looked away, it would all disappear. It would go dark, like before, dark and light at the same time, and somehow still empty.

Something flashed in his memory; emerald eyes, hands reaching down for him, a blinding light. It was gone as soon as it came, but it left him cold.

Techno made his way over, holding the mug out to Ranboo. Ranboo looked up at him. There was a dark purple bruise that spread across the left side of his face, creeping down his jaw and onto his neck. His left tooth was chipped at the top where it jutted out from his lip, and a crack ran down the length of it, stopping just above his lip. One eye was bloodshot.

Ranboo reached up to take the mug from him. The now-golden scars glimmered in the firelight. The mug was warm.

“It’s a healing potion,” Techno explained softly. “Phil’s gotten pretty good at makin’ ‘em, you know,” he said.

“Thank you,” Ranboo murmured, unsure of what else to say. He raised the mug to his lips. It smelled sweet and sugary and tasted like light. The world looked a little brighter, and he felt that light spread through down his throat and chest. The feeling didn’t fade. It tingled and buzzed, and Ranboo could almost feel the blood running through him.

He placed a hand over his chest. Under his shirt he felt raised skin. When he touched it, he saw those eyes again, emerald eyes, there and gone. He ran his fingers over it, feeling the edges where they were jagged and branched out into thin tendrils of scar tissue. He took a breath, and then pulled his shirt away from his neck and looked down at the long golden scar that cut through the skin on his chest. His skin was black on one side and white on the other, and he felt even more like something torn apart and put back together.

“Ranboo—” Techno started, but Ranboo cut him off.

“Did I really die?” Ranboo asked. Techno opened his mouth, but closed it. He looked haunted. “I... I had a dream. About the End, and it— I thought it would never— it was...” Ranboo swallowed hard. “I died, didn’t I?” He looked to Techno, but Techno just stared back at him, his jaw set tight until eventually he looked away altogether. Ranboo furrowed his brow and looked to Phil.

“You did,” Phil said tensely. Ranboo nodded slowly, running his hand across his chest once more before letting it fall back into his lap.

“Is Dream dead?” Ranboo asked. “He’s dead, right? I saw him, I— he has to be—”

“He’s dead, too, Ranboo,” Phil said. “He’s not coming back.” Ranboo nodded again, letting out a shaky breath.

“So it’s over,” Ranboo murmured. It wasn’t just something he’d imagined. It wasn’t a dream or a delusion. He’d done it, all of it; brought Dream here, he’s died, he’d seen the God, the End, the Void, and now he was back. And it was over.

“Ranboo, what the hell—” Phil began, his voice soft but full of confusion and hurt, and Ranboo flinched, closing his eyes.

“I know,” he interrupted, his shoulders tense. “I know, I—” He didn’t even know what to say.

“Ranboo, that was insane, what you did,” Phil said. “We had a plan, we had everything under control.”

“No, we didn’t,” Ranboo shook his head. “We didn’t. We pretended we did. You and Techno promised to keep me safe, I know, but it— it was a promise you were always going to break. It wouldn’t be your fault, but you would.”

“You don’t know that,” Techno muttered. Ranboo could hear the bitterness in his tone.

“I do, though. I do know. You don’t...” Ranboo swallowed. “There’s nothing I can say to make you understand,” he said, shaking his head. “I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t deal with that fear, with the paranoia. We all knew he was in there just waiting, and I couldn’t stop thinking about Karl and seeing myself like that, driven mad and—” He felt a lump growing in his throat and cut himself off before it could grow any further, forcing himself to take a breath.

“You could have told us,” Phil said. “We could have helped. We could have prepared.”

“You never would have let me do it,” Ranboo sighed. “You would have found any way to avoid this, you would have done anything—” Phil opened his mouth, but Ranboo kept talking. “And it wouldn’t have mattered. Dream was always going to find a way, *always* .”

“ *We* could have found a way,” Techno huffed. “A different way—”

“We *tried*, ” Ranboo said. “The totem is cracked— *was* cracked. The potions only would have gotten us so far, you saw what it did to Karl! It was always temporary, he was always going to be there just eating away at me and driving me mad and I couldn’t do it!” Ranboo cried, his voice cracking. “I’m selfish,” he said, “I’m selfish and I couldn’t do it, it was too much.”

“It wasn’t just about you, Ranboo,” Techno said.

“You don’t understand—” Ranboo repeated, but Techno cut him off.

“You could have died— you *did* die!” Techno said, the volume of his voice rising. “You died! Dream killed you, he tore out your heart, and I held your *body*, Ranboo!” Techno stood, pacing slowly in the room. Ranboo shrunk in on himself. “Phil *begged* for that idiot God to bring you back and he almost didn’t! And then you would have been dead, and what would we be left to do?”

Live, Ranboo thought. But he didn’t say it out loud.

“I thought you trusted us,” Techno said, the fight leaving his voice.

“Tech—” Phil started. Techno continued anyway.

“We could have kept you safe.”

Phil closed his mouth. Ranboo hated this. He hated fighting. He hated seeing them so upset, seeing them so angry, so disappointed, and all of it directed at him, but it was necessary. It hurt, but it had to hurt. It could only ever have hurt.

“You would have tried,” Ranboo said softly. “And eventually, you would have failed, and you’d never forgive yourselves, so... I won’t say I’m sorry. I don’t want you to forgive me,” he admitted. “Blame me. All of this... it’s my fault. Only mine.” Techno turned to face him, and his eyes were red. Ranboo felt guilt like blood on his tongue.

“ *God*, you just—” Techno groaned, balling his fists up before forcing a breath into his lungs. “We almost lost you, kid,” he said quietly. “Foolish said... he said you wouldn’t even want to come back, and... you were *dead*. ”

“Foolish?” Ranboo asked.

“The Totem God,” Phil explained. “He called himself Foolish.”

“He said... he said I wouldn’t want to come back?” Ranboo murmured.

“He said you were at peace,” Phil sighed. “That... that you were in pain, here. And we didn’t know if—” Phil cut himself off, his jaw tight.

“I was,” Ranboo admitted quietly. “It was peace. Kind of. It was... I don’t know. It was empty.”

“You remember it?” Techno asked, and Ranboo nodded.

“I saw the End, I think. That’s what it felt like, like... like there was nothing else, nothing left. But it— it just felt wrong.”

“Wrong?” Phil said.

“I just... I wanted to come home,” Ranboo said softly. Techno and Phil said nothing.

The silence that hung in the room was deafening. God, he wanted to say he was sorry. He was sorry. He was *so* sorry. But to say sorry was to ask to be forgiven, and he didn’t want to be forgiven. He wanted to be reminded. He wanted to remember, to let it be his fault, he didn’t want to ask anything of them, not now. He didn’t deserve it.

“I know I can’t undo anything,” Ranboo said, “and I know what I did, and I know... I guess I don’t know what you went through. What I put you through. I just... I just wanted to be *home*. And if Dream was still here, if he was still in my head, then it wasn’t... it wasn’t *right*. And now...”

Now everything was clear.

He was alone in his own head now, and it was quiet, and it was clear. It was finally over.

“Now it’s home,” Techno offered. Ranboo nodded, and he couldn’t help but smile, because it *was*. And *god*, that felt good.

“Yeah, it... it is.”

The smile turned into a laugh, one he couldn’t stop from escaping, and that laugh turned into more laughter, and then into sobs, and then he couldn’t tell which was which. He pressed his hands against his eyes and saw light dancing behind his eyelids.

He felt a hand card through his hair and rest on his shoulder, pulling him to the side until he was resting his head against something warm, and he knew it was Techno. So he cried, or he laughed, or both.

“It’s so quiet,” Ranboo breathed out.

“Yeah?” Techno asked. Ranboo nodded against his chest. “Good,” he said quietly.

“I’m glad, mate,” Phil added, rubbing Ranboo’s shoulder. “It’s long overdue.”

“It’s so quiet,” Ranboo repeated, not sure what else he could say. He couldn’t even think about anything else. He could hear the crackle of the fire, the light wind outside that sent little particles of ice skittering against the glass of the windows, the slow inhale and exhale of Techno’s breathing. He could hear the fabric rustle as they moved. He could hear himself *think*. There was no more cotton in his head, no more spiderwebs behind his eyes.

He hadn't realized it, but he'd forgotten what this felt like.

Eventually, when his breathing evened out, he found himself with only one question lingering in his mind.

"What happened to the body?" Ranboo asked, pulling away from Techno. "Dream's body?"

"We built a pyre," Phil said. "It's still outside. We figured..."

"We thought you'd want to see it," Techno finished Phil's sentence for him. "We haven't lit it yet." Ranboo nodded, looking out the window. There was ice at the edges, but even so, he could make out a green patch in the snow.

"But he's... there's a body?"

"There is," Techno said.

"Okay," Ranboo sighed, nodding again. "That... that's good. That— I needed there to be a body."

"Yeah, it... it makes it real, huh?" Phil mumbled, leaning back. His eyes looked distant.

"Can you, um... can you tell me what happened?" Ranboo asked. Phil looked up at Techno, and they shared a look. "I want to know. I don't remember— after—"

"Phil killed it," Techno said. Phil looked away. He didn't meet Ranboo's eye.

"You... you did?" Ranboo asked. Phil tightened his jaw.

“After you... died,” Techno said, forcing the word out stiffly, “Foolish appeared. The– the Totem God.” Ranboo remembered, somehow; not the events that unfolded, but he remembered the God. It was like seeing it in a dream. “It made Dream human. So Phil...”

“I stabbed it in the neck,” Phil said bluntly. Ranboo swallowed hard. He couldn’t imagine it. He couldn’t see Phil killing someone, even if it was Dream. But Phil seemed different, somehow. He seemed tired. His eyes were different, distant, haunted by something. Haunted by this. By everything.

“Oh,” Ranboo breathed.

“It just happened. I didn’t even think, I just... moved,” Phil muttered. “I’m not– I don’t *regret* it, I just... he– it was so human at the end.”

Techno placed a hand on Phil’s shoulder, and Phil reached up, resting his own hand on top of it.

“It’s over now,” Phil said softly. “It’s in the past.”

“What happens now?” Ranboo asked. He didn’t know exactly what he meant, or what answer he was looking for, but Phil and Techno both seemed to understand.

“I don’t know, mate,” Phil said. “How... I mean, how do you feel?”

“I’m... I don’t know. I’m okay, I think,” Ranboo answered, slowly taking inventory of himself. The ache was still there, a dull feeling that pulsed alongside his heartbeat, and there was something else there too, something numb. “I feel like there’s something– I don’t know. Missing.” He placed his hand over his chest.

Phil looked at Techno, a knowing look in his eyes, and then stood. He walked over to the kitchen and picked up a small bundle of fabric from the table. He brought it over, placing it gently in Ranboo's hand, and Ranboo set down the mug of healing potion on the table beside him. The bundle was heavier than Ranboo thought it would be. The contents tinkled lightly. In his palm, it felt familiar in a sad sort of way.

He unwrapped it, letting the fabric fall over the sides of his palm. In the bundle, there were fragments that looked like glass, emerald green and teal and swirling slowly with ginting light.

It was his pearl.

Ranboo felt like he was holding his heart in his hand.

He held it awkwardly, like somehow it was going to burn him or explode or simply disintegrate. It didn't. After a moment, he drew it closer to him and hesitantly poked at the pieces. He felt the emptiness grow colder. He opened his mouth, but he found nothing to say.

"Oh," he said instead. "This is... oh." That made sense. He didn't know why it was so surprising to see it now, to see his pearl shattered in his hand.

Dream had ripped it from his chest. The memory made his stomach churn, made him taste blood in his mouth. How could he have expected it to still be intact, to still be his, to still... but seeing it in his hand, now, he felt like he was sinking.

This was that emptiness, then. He felt cut off, or cut out, a connection he once felt to something more now severed. He wondered if this was how the Endermen felt after they were sealed off from the End, after their pearls were shattered, too. It felt like his feet were planted a little too firmly to the ground.

"That's it then," Ranboo said finally. "It's really sealed off, now. The End. And the Void," he added. "That's... this was the last thing that connected our worlds, right?"

“Seems that way,” Phil said. “I don’t think we can know for sure, but... Foolish seemed to think so.”

“Why’s that?” Ranboo asked.

“Well he said, with you... *gone*... he could leave this world for good. He said it was *balance*,” Phil said. Techno snorted, but said nothing. He seemed bitter. Ranboo supposed he had a right to be. The details didn’t seem to matter.

After a moment, Ranboo let out a breath and folded the cloth back over the shattered pieces of the pearl. Phil reached out, offering to take it from him, and Ranboo obliged, placing it in his hand. Phil set it down on the table next to the couch. Ranboo eyed it, but forced himself to look away.

“Are... are you guys okay?” Ranboo asked, looking between Phil and Techno. Phil sighed.

“More or less,” Techno answered for him. “The healing potions are speeding things up. Nothing we won’t live through.”

“Okay,” Ranboo nodded. “Oh, how... how long was I, um. Asleep?” he asked.

“A little over two days,” Phil said. “Those potions work fast, huh? Karl left some good instructions. I feel like I’m making them better every time.”

“What a nerd,” Techno grunted. Phil rolled his eyes, smiling slightly. “But I’m not seein’ double anymore, so that’s something,” he added. “And you seem like you’re sitting up a little straighter,” he said to Phil.

“I’m still creaky,” Phil said. “Don’t say it.”

“Old,” Techno said. Phil groaned. Ranboo smiled, breathing out a laugh. Some things never changed.

Techno smiled too, a half smile that favored the unbruised side of his face.

Ranboo picked up the mug of healing potion and took another sip, letting it coat his throat with sweet warmth. He wondered if he even needed it. What had the Totem God done to him? How was he alive? Surely there was some cost, some price to pay. He didn’t want to ask, though. He was sure Techno and Phil had considered it as well. He was sure they’d spend hours worrying over him, waiting for him to wake up, to open his eyes. It was a question with no answer. They were flying blind. Some things never changed.

Ranboo looked out the window again, eyeing the patch of green grass that bloomed outside.

“Do you want to see it?” Phil asked gently. Ranboo sighed, and then nodded.

Phil stood cautiously, holding a hand over his ribs. He stretched his back, pulling his shoulders back slightly with an exhale.

“Come on,” he said, extending a hand to Ranboo. Ranboo set the mug down again, taking Phil’s hand. It was warm and steady. Ranboo stood slowly. His legs felt like jelly, and he had to think hard about where he was putting his weight. He felt like his center of balance was thrown off. Phil held on to him, letting him lean into his grasp.

“Put on some shoes this time,” Techno said, and Ranboo smiled sheepishly. He took a step, then another, feeling Phil and Techno’s gaze on him, until eventually he found his balance. He felt a bit like a newborn calf.

Techno picked up a flint and steel from the chest by the door. Phil held Ranboo steady as he pulled on his boots, and then draped his cloak around his shoulders. Ranboo held the collar closed with one hand, running his thumb back and forth over the soft fur that lined the cloak. He remembered when Phil had made this for him. It felt like an eternity ago. It was still just as warm.

The air outside was crisp and cold. The sun was high, pale and bright, and there were wisps of clouds scattered in the sky. Out across the lake, Ranboo could see a hole in the ice. There were indents in the snow, footprints, scuffs of purple and red that still stood out against the icy surface. It was like a handprint left behind on glass. If he was as good at tracking as Techno was, maybe this would have been like solving a puzzle.

He didn't need to piece this together, though. He knew what had happened.

Phil placed a hand on Ranboo's shoulder. Ranboo took a breath.

To the west, he saw what he was looking for. There was grass there, tall, green grass dotted with wildflowers and swaying gently in the wind. At the edge of the grass, just outside its reach, there was a stack of wood, piled neatly at the bottom with pieces jutting up in a pyramid. Branches were tucked into it, little sprigs of green poking out.

"He's in there?" Ranboo asked.

"Yeah," Techno hummed.

Ranboo saw its eyes, dark and hollow, echoing in his head. He also saw *his* eyes, green and glassy. And now he saw this, a pyre, a funeral for the creature that had tormented and tortured and taken over their lives.

"We could.. I mean, if you wanted to *see* it—" Techno started, but Ranboo cut him off.

"No," he said. "No I... I trust you. I trust that he's... that it's in there."

When they stepped into the meadow of grass, the air changed immediately. It smelled different, like pollen and rich soil, and it was warm and light. There was dew on the grass. The flowers were turned toward the sun.

In the center of the meadow, the grass was glinting with gold, dusted with light. *That's where I died*, Ranboo thought. He knew it. He didn't need to ask. He could see the way Techno and Phil eyed the spot as well, and that was enough confirmation.

"The grass is still here," Ranboo noted. "Shouldn't it have... frozen over? Wilted?"

"I don't think the usual rules apply here anymore, kid," Techno said. "This patch has stayed exactly the same way it was when Foolish showed up."

Ranboo nudged a clump of grass with his toe. Little glimmers of gold rose up and drifted into the air like pollen. It felt alive.

"Do you think it'll be here forever?" Ranboo asked.

"Maybe," Phil said. "You know, if it did, maybe we could grow more crops here."

"Of course that's what you think about," Techno chuckled.

"What, you would say no to hot peppers? Sweet potatoes?" Phil asked.

"I'm perfectly content with regular potatoes, as a matter of fact," Techno replied.

"It really is pretty, though, isn't it?" Ranboo said softly. He stared down at the grass below his feet, at the little red and yellow flowers, tiny blue buds on thin stems, puffs of white and yellow. Ranboo bent down, running his hand against the grass. The little flecks of sparkling golden dew tingled a bit, but they didn't burn. He sat in the grass, lowering himself slowly until he was laying down, staring straight up at the sky and at Techno and Phil who looked down at him.

Phil looked at Techno for a moment before sighing, and then he laid down beside Ranboo, spreading his wings out in the grass with a huff of an exhale. Techno raised his eyebrows slightly before laying down as well.

“You alright, Ranboo?” Techno asked, shifting slightly in the grass until he was comfortable.

“Yeah, just... you know.”

“Mmhm,” Techno hummed.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo said quietly. He kept talking before Techno or Phil could say anything. “And don’t– don’t say it’s okay. And don’t forgive me, just– I’m sorry. I need you to know that I’m sorry. About everything.” Techno sighed, reaching over to ruffle Ranboo’s hair.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said. “It was out of any of our control. You did what you needed to do, and I can’t... I can understand that, at least.”

“Thank you,” Ranboo murmured.

“But god, you are *so* grounded,” Techno muttered. Ranboo laughed, and Techno patted him on the shoulder.

“I’ll make up for it,” Ranboo said. “I’ll do the dishes for the rest of my life. And I’ll wake up Phil in the mornings,” he added.

“I’d never subject you to that,” Techno said. Ranboo could hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m not *that* bad in the morning,” Phil grumbled.

“Uh huh,” Techno sighed. Phil groaned, shaking his head. Ranboo took a slow breath, savoring the warm air.

“I wish...” he started, trying to find the words. “I wish it could have been different,” Ranboo offered.

“I don’t,” Phil said. Ranboo turned slightly, looking to Phil out of the corner of his eye, but Phil stared straight up at the sky. “You’re alive. We’re all alive. Dream is dead,” he said simply. “And we’ve got a chance now to just... live. A second chance.”

“Can we just go back to normal?” Ranboo asked. “After everything?” There was silence between them. They stared at the sky, watched the clouds drift aimlessly past the sun, felt the breeze blow through the tundra and swirl around in their little meadow, their impossible meadow.

“No,” Techno said finally. “But we can go forward.”

It was enough.

Chapter End Notes

We’re in the wind down now, friends :) and no, unfortunately im not just going to add on chapters until the end of time. It’s really 31. Which means there’s really only two chapters left. Which means’ im REALLY gonna cry, REALLY soon :’D

I don’t think its hit me yet how close this is to being finished. I posted the first chapter of this fic in MARCH. It’s been 8 crazy months writing and talking to you in the comments and hearing your theories and thoughts. I’m so happy all of you have stuck with me for the ride. Visage recently hit 1000 subscriptions. That means 1000 people get an email every time I post. I can’t even conceptualize that. It’s insane.

All this to say, thank you all so much for being here and for supporting what I write. It really means the world.

Anyway. Mushy gushy stuff over... for now :) let me know what you think of this chapter in the comments!

if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

11/28 - hope everyone had a nice thanksgiving and/or a nice break if ur in america! i went and saw some family which was fun. but now im back on that grind :) 2k words into the next chapter!! i cant believe this is ending so soon. jesus. im a bit behind on answering comments, sorry!! ill get to u all i promise <3

12/3 - im like 5k ish words through!! my goal is to finish today or tomorrow... we'll see how that goes. hnm. BUT HOLY FUUUUUCK?? WE PASSED 100k HITS???? WHAT???? I'm. dead. blown away. yall. im,,,,,, love u all dearly thank u all for reading for real.

12/3 but later in the day – hahahah this chapter is over 8k words. yall are eatin good. idk if it'll be done tonight but... tonight or tomorrow. is the goal.

12/4 – OKAY. Chapter is DONE. and its.... it may or may not be over 10k words. Anyway. Will post tonight :D

To Be Loved

Chapter Summary

Ranboo threw the flower into the base of the fire.

It settled between two half burned logs, the white petals illuminated in orange and red as the fire licked at them, but it was not consumed. It shifted slightly as the hot wind from the fire blew against it. Little veins of gold spread through the petals and the stem and the leaves. Ranboo tilted his head as he watched it.

Techno wondered what he was thinking; if he was thinking about his own body, his own blood; if he was thinking that's what he'd looked like, all golden veins and illuminated in light like fire; if he was thinking that he was the fire, or he was the flower, or he was just himself, or he was the ashes that rose from the flames or the pyre that was being eaten away or the meadow of grass that still smelled of pollen and dirt and dew.

But Ranboo said nothing.

Chapter Notes

Check the end notes for a big announcement :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The pyre burned with no dramatic flair. It had no glittering black clouds of midnight blue smoke or sparks that flew from the body that burned inside of it, just flickering orange flames and flecks of ash that floated into the air and touched down to make the snow grey. Smoke rose aimlessly into the air and drifted away through the air and out to the open tundra, carried by the wind.

It was not a funeral. No words were said, no grief was felt. It was simply a fire, simply a body, simply an end. It was all it needed to be. Techno had watched closely as the little spark from the flint ignited into a flame, and he'd watched that flame travel across the dry wood and branches and engulf the evergreen needles, and he watched still as the fire grew and ate away more and more of the fuel beneath it.

The pyre shifted slightly, every so often, as the wood was consumed. It burned hot. It reminded him of the Nether, a dry sort of heat that made his skin tingle, but he didn't back up. He watched it burn until the hot air that billowed off of it settled down, until the wild oranges and reds and blues of the fire contained themselves under the splintering branches, until the roar became dull.

"I've decided I'm an atheist," Techno announced. His eyes traced a single ember that danced out from the pyre and floated toward him before dying away and floating off into nothingness.

"Is that right?" Phil asked, tilting his head slightly.

"Mhm," Techno hummed in response.

"Fair," Phil nodded sagely, turning back to the fire.

"How's that work?" Ranboo asked, looking up from where he sat cross-legged in front of the pyre.

"I simply do not believe that the Totem God exists," Techno shrugged, glancing down at him.

"You met him," Ranboo said incredulously. "You literally spoke to him."

"Nah," Techno said simply. Ranboo breathed a laugh.

"Musta been someone else," Phil added.

"Exactly," Techno nodded. Ranboo smiled slightly, shaking his head, and looked back to the fire, leaning back on his palms.

“Must have been,” Ranboo said softly. Techno watched as the kid stretched his fingers out in the grass, running his thumbs back and forth against the greenery. His fingers came across a wildflower, one with white petals and little yellow centers, and he plucked it without looking.

Slowly, Ranboo brought it up to his face, examining it closely. Techno wondered what was going through his head. He wondered what it felt like right now. He wondered what that *quiet* sounded like. Ranboo’s gold flecked skin caught the light of the fire and his scars seemed to glow. His chest rose and fell slowly with each breath. Under his skin, Techno pictured golden blood flowing through his veins, pulsing through his heart, coloring his body in light. He held that image in his head with determined focus.

Ranboo threw the flower into the base of the fire.

It settled between two half burned logs, the white petals illuminated in orange and red as the fire licked at them, but it was not consumed. It shifted slightly as the hot wind from the fire blew against it. Little veins of gold spread through the petals and the stem and the leaves. Ranboo tilted his head as he watched it.

Techno wondered what he was thinking; if he was thinking about his own body, his own blood; if he was thinking that’s what he’d looked like, all golden veins and illuminated in light like fire; if he was thinking that he was the fire, or he was the flower, or he was just himself, or he was the ashes that rose from the flames or the pyre that was being eaten away or the meadow of grass that still smelled of pollen and dirt and dew.

But Ranboo said nothing.

Techno let out a breath, resting one hand on the kid’s head and carding his fingers through his hair. It was soft. Techno had spent the better part of an hour brushing through it, removing the bits of ice and snow and tarry black specks and golden blood. Phil had done the same for Techno, then, and then Techno had done the same for Phil, picking debris from his feathers until there was nothing left to preen, and then they’d gone back to doing nothing. To waiting. Waiting for Ranboo to wake up.

Ranboo leaned into Techno's hand, resting his head against the piglin's leg. It brought him back to the present.

"Your hair's gotten long," Techno said absentmindedly. Ranboo hummed in response and twitched his ears slightly. There was a slight shimmer over one of them where there was once a burn.

Techno moved his hands slowly, hooking his fingers under soft clusters of hair. The motion was deft, subconscious, and Techno wove pieces of hair back and forth until there was a loose braid winding its way down Ranboo's scalp and down to the base of his neck. When he got to the end, he didn't have anything to tie it off with, so he let it fall from his hand and unravel slowly from the bottom.

Ranboo reached up, running his fingers over the braid before resting his hands in his lap again. Techno saw the corner of his mouth twitch into a smile.

The pyre burned until it had nothing left to burn. It burned until it was ash and dust, until it was nothing more than scorched earth and cinders, and the ground beneath it was blackened with soot.

Over time, the wind would carry away the ash. Snow would fall, and it would cover the footprints and the blood and the scars. Night would fall, and fall away, and fall again, and as it fell now, the sun slowly dipping behind a horizon of trees and tundra, Techno wanted nothing more than to hold onto this and hold it close.

It had been late in fall when the calf was born. The night was clear, the sky dotted with clouds, and the moon was little more than a crescent hanging overhead. The calf's mother was a woolly little heifer, brown and stout with thick horns that reached up to the stars, and she carried her calf for a long 268 days.

It was not the calf's time to come, but that didn't seem to matter very much in the eyes of the world. She came early, and when she came, she fell on her knees on hard wood and did not

stir. Her mother licked at her closed eyes and at her swirls of fur and nudged her little chest, waiting for it to stir with life and breath.

It was a windy night. The other cows in the barn gathered close, watching quietly, waiting. When the calf took her first breath, the herd huddled in and kept her warm.

She was a little fuzzy calf, who came out missing an ear but otherwise seemed perfectly content with life.

They called her Esther.

She learned to walk that night. On unsteady hooves she wobbled about, walking up to each cow and grunting at them when they nudged her on. In the morning, when the man with wings opened the barn door, she stumbled her way over to him as well and ran her little head into his legs with great enthusiasm.

Esther grew slowly. She was small and thin and her legs were much longer than one would expect a calf's legs to be, but despite her circumstances, her heart was strong. She watched the sun rise and set each day, drank her mother's milk, grazed on grass when the snow was thin and huddled inside when the wind was strong.

She came to know the world around her. She learned eyes; blue eyes of the winged man, bright and icy like the snow outside, and different eyes, rusty red eyes that seemed tired and heavy but glimmered with life like the sun itself was behind them. She learned the day and night, learned where to graze when the snow was thick and where to huddle when the nights were cold and dark. She learned of warm sun and stormy skies, and once, after the sky was so dark and so thick with snow that it covered any sign of light or life, she learned new eyes.

They were strange eyes. When she saw them first, they were confused eyes, eyes like a newborn calf, eyes that reflected in her own, green and red and colored with some unknown darkness. But there was a curiosity there as well, curiosity that made her single little ear flick with intrigue. He fed her honey candy from his palm and smiled when she nibbled at his fingers.

The calf grew into her legs. She filled out slowly, putting on weight one day at a time. Her legs wobbled less. After the storm, the snow came up to her chest, and she had to follow behind her mother to venture out into the field. She watched those new eyes carefully.

She watched as they became slowly more clear. The cloud of confusion was lightened, though never gone. There were always questions, there. Always a story that wasn't quite finished, a puzzle without all the pieces. He was a curiosity, a part of a collection, a piece to a whole. Something about him was an oddity, begging questions, begging answers, like a star that had shown up in an unrecognizable sky.

He fed her, or brushed her, or cleaned out the barns, and she followed him when she could, just watching. He fed her honey candy when he had it, and when he didn't, she nudged his pockets and huffed at him until he laughed and pushed her nose away. Some days he smelled like tea leaves and sugar. Others, he smelled like dirt. Once, he smelled like ash.

There was a time when Esther didn't see them for a long while, not blue eyes or red eyes or multicolored curious eyes. She would pace outside during the day, looking to the woods or to the lake or to the tundra, waiting. She would nudge her mother as though she knew of their return. She slept near the barn door, watching the stars until she fell asleep, and in the morning she waited again.

When those curious eyes returned, they were different. There was a knowing behind them, an anticipation. The boy cleaned out the barn with exhausted eyes, tired eyes, eyes that were afraid and full of worry. She nudged at his pockets, and he didn't push her away. He patted her head and held her close, one hand running over her neck and the other cupping the place where an ear would have been had she waited just a little longer to open her eyes on the world. But he was still himself. He was still those curious eyes.

Later, there was noise. There was noise, and light, and howls so loud she wondered how any cow could have stood to bear them with two ears. There were cries and calling voices, voices that rang out and voices that thundered and voices that wept, and then there was silence, blissful silence. There was quiet.

Now, the calf looked into those eyes once more. They were changed, ever changed, always changed. They were never the same twice, really. How could they be? She looked at those eyes, now glimmering at the edges with gold, and tilted her head.

He held out his hand, palm up. In it, there was a little round hard candy, golden like the tears in his eyes.

He was changed, ever changed, but he was the same in the end; the same body, the same eyes, the same curiosity; he was the same puzzle piece that was ever missing, the same star in the sky, the same part of a whole. She had missed him, even in that short time. She missed him as though she had not yet known him, as though she had never known him, as though she had known him in another life and had only just recognized him again.

Nothing had changed, not really. She nibbled at his fingers and nudged his pockets, and he ran his fingers over her head and rubbed her nose with his thumb. He smelled warm, like tea leaves and sugar again, and like light, and like gold, and like honey and pollen and life.

“No, no— wets first!”

“What?”

“Wets first, then dry!”

“I don’t—”

“Wets!”

“Stop sayin’ *wets!*” Techno shouted.

“Then stop putting in the oil!” Phil replied, taking the glass bottle out of Techno’s hand. “You combine the wet ingredients together first, then the dry ingredients, and then put it all

together. You're going all out of order."

"You could have said that *first*, " Techno grumbled. He wiped his hands against his pants.

"I've told you this before," Phil tutted. He measured out the oil and poured it into the same bowl as the eggs and milk were sitting in.

"It doesn't say that in the recipe," Techno said. "Look— *in a separate bowl, combine oil and—* oh."

"Yeah, *oh*, " Phil sighed. He started stirring the ingredients together, sloshing them around until they were combined.

"It's not my fault your handwriting is so bad," Techno said, reading over the page again.

"Oh that..." Ranboo added quietly. "I translated that one," he said. Techno looked at him over the top of his glasses, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, now I just look like a jerk," he said, setting the recipe down on the counter with a sigh. Ranboo stifled a laugh, but the chirp he made rang out clearly despite his attempt. It made Phil and Techno both smile.

"You're not entirely wrong," Phil noted as he set the bowl back down. "His handwriting does need some work."

"Aw, man," Ranboo muttered, but he was still smiling.

"Here," Phil said. He passed a bowl of powders into Techno's hands. "Pour this into my bowl while I stir. *Slowly*."

“Yes, *dad* ,” Techno huffed. Phil rolled his eyes.

“Ranboo, can you cut up the cherries?” Phil asked. “They’re by the sink.”

“I already washed ‘em,” Techno added. Ranboo nodded, making his way over to the cutting board.

“How much at a time?” Techno asked Phil, positioning his bowl over Phil’s. He shook it gently until the flour mixture was right at the edge.

“Like... go until... yeah, like that. Stop.” Phil stirred the liquids until the flour was combined. “Okay, go again? Now stop.”

It was odd to Techno how easily they fell back into domesticity. It felt natural in a way, just to wake up in the morning, feed the cows, check the water supply, dust off the windowsills. There were things that simply had to be done; they still needed to cook, to clean, to light the fire at night and make tea in the morning. There was a stiffness to it, like a muscle that hadn’t been stretched in a while, but despite that it was almost entrancing.

Techno could get lost in moments like this, where all he had to worry about was pouring flour and waiting to be told *when*, standing in the warmth of Phil’s kitchen with an apron tied around his waist like he had never even touched a sword, held a weapon, cut down another living thing. Here he wasn’t a hunter or a fighter or a survivor. Here, Phil could humble him in an instant simply by telling him he poured too much flour at once, and now there would be *lumps* in the cake, god forbid. As though it was the worst thing that could ever happen to them.

They’d found the recipe in one of Techno’s old books long ago, translated it back when there was nothing better to do, before anything felt threatening and nothing was looming around the corner. They had finally managed to thaw the eggs and milk left in the storage cellar, and so Phil had claimed, what better to do than make something sweet?

It was a recipe for cherry cake, one that would be thick like pound cake with little bits of fruit floating in it. It came from a little piece of paper tucked into the back of a journal, and there

were little notes written in the margins, *powdered sugar works better here*, and *let cool before flipping*, and *glaze with honey and vanilla*. They didn't have vanilla, but Ranboo and Phil preferred chocolate anyway, and they all knew Techno's sweet tooth didn't discriminate.

They got into a rhythm of it, Techno pouring flour and Phil stirring a few times until it was combined, and then Techno would pour again. The mixture slowly thickened and began smelling sweet and sugary. Techno resisted the urge to dip his finger into it, solely because he knew Phil wouldn't hesitate to whack him with the back of his spoon if he did.

Techno had nearly finished pouring the last bit of the flour mixture into the bowl when Ranboo hissed out a breath through his teeth, and he heard the knife clatter against the countertop. The sound made Techno turn so quickly he almost dropped the bowl.

Ranboo had one hand folded over the other, covering the fingers of his left hand tightly. He held his hands close to his body, looking down at them with a furrowed brow.

"What happened?" Techno asked. The knife lay on the cutting board, the slightest glint of gold on the edge. "Did you cut yourself?" Ranboo nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "Not bad, just a little. It's fine."

"Lemme see," Techno said. He set his bowl down on the counter, reaching for a hand towel to wipe his hands off. Ranboo hesitated for a moment, but after a moment, let his shoulders relax.

"I just wasn't paying attention," he said, shaking his head. "I think I just need a bandage or something."

"We've got more healing potions," Phil offered. He rested the spoon against the side of the bowl, holding onto it a moment to make sure it wouldn't fall before letting go.

“No, no,” Ranboo shook his head, “It’s definitely not that bad, see? It’s...” Ranboo took his other hand away from the cut on his finger, looking down at it. The cut was small, he was right. It was a narrow, clean slice that looked like hardly more than a paper cut. It bled slightly. Techno blinked at the little gold drops that gathered along the length of the wound. At the edges, it seemed like there was light coming from under Ranboo’s skin.

“Oh, that’s not terrible,” Phil said, leaning over his shoulder. “Let me grab something for it.” Ranboo said nothing. He continued to stare down at his hand, silently, whatever thought he had intended on voicing now vanished.

Techno reached out, resting his fingers against the kid’s wrist, but he still didn’t move. Techno looked up at him.

His eyes were glazed in gold like there was a curtain of sunlight covering them. His irises shook from side to side as he stared down at his hand, at the blood that oozed slowly from the little cut across his finger. It formed into drops before trailing down the side of his finger. It was a tiny cut. Hardly anything to flinch at. But Techno could tell from Ranboo’s face that the severity of the injury wasn’t what mattered at that moment.

“Hey,” Techno said as gently as he could. “Ranboo?” He covered Ranboo’s hand with his own, blocking the injury from view.

When Techno’s fingers brushed against Ranboo’s skin, the kid’s breathing hitched, and he pulled his hand back as though he’d been burned. He looked panicked, like a deer caught in a trap, his eyes wide and his jaw tight with a fear Techno couldn’t place. All of the serenity that had gathered in the kitchen only a moment before was suddenly cold. Ranboo looked back down at the blood that was slowly trailing across his fingers and onto his palm, and he made a noise in the back of his throat like a dying animal.

Techno could see the start of the spiral. Ranboo rubbed his other palm across the cut, and his skin came away shimmering with gold blood. His eyes seemed to shift with recognition, and then realization, and then repulsion. His expression twisted. He rubbed at the cut again, this time more hastily, and it only made the cut open up more.

“Okay, okay,” Techno murmured, holding out one hand in front of him to try to calm Ranboo. Phil appeared at his side, holding out a roll of gauze, and Techno took it blindly, shaking it

out so it unraveled. “It’s alright. It’s just a cut, kid.”

Ranboo’s eyes snapped up, but he didn’t meet Techno’s gaze. He stared through him, at something behind him, or around him, and his focus darted around the room like he was looking for something. Techno stepped forward, holding the gauze out to cover the cut, but Ranboo pulled back again. His hands were shaking. Golden tears were already beginning to form in the corners of his eyes.

“Get it off,” Ranboo muttered, his voice cracking with tension. “I don’t want to— I don’t want it, get— get it *off!*” Ranboo scrubbed at his eyes, staring down at his hands in horror when they came away with more gold. He wiped the back of one hand on his shirt and ran the other across his face again forcefully, hunching over on himself as he stepped back. His hip collided with the table, and the sound made him jump.

“Ranboo, mate—” Phil said, but Ranboo cut him off.

“Stop, make it stop! Why is it...” he looked down at his hands again, looking at his palms and then turning them over, now glistening with gold. “Why is he *here* —” Ranboo tensed, reaching for his face again with his claws aimed at his eyes, and Techno lunged forward.

He grabbed Ranboo’s wrists before his nails could come anywhere near his face, pulling them away and wrapping one hand around both of the kid’s wrists. He pushed aside the familiarity he felt at this situation. He wouldn’t let this panic go any further. He was safe. He was home. He didn’t need to feel like this anymore.

“No one is here,” Techno said firmly.

“He is,” Ranboo insisted. “He’s— *look* .” Ranboo twisted his hands around in Techno’s wrist so that they could both see the little cut on his finger that still steadily dripped golden blood.

“That’s just you, Ranboo. It’s just a little blood. See?” Techno asked. He could feel Ranboo trembling, his hands shaking slightly in Techno’s grip. Ranboo’s eyes flashed with gold again and his pupils narrowed, staring at something over Techno’s shoulder. “Ranboo, look at me, kid,” Techno said softly. Ranboo blinked rapidly, focusing his shaky eyes back onto Techno.

“You’re alright. Look. It’s a little cut, that’s all. A little bit of blood, nothing we haven’t seen before,” Techno explained, doing his best to keep his voice calm and even.

It was true in many ways. They’d all seen far worse injuries, far worse wounds, far worse circumstances. Techno’s shoulder ached, throbbing slowly as if to remind him. As if he could forget. But his eyes dwelled on the gold shimmer of Ranboo’s blood, *new* blood. They hadn’t seen this. Ranboo hadn’t. He hadn’t seen himself bleed this new life from under his own skin, from his own veins.

“It’s just a little cut,” Techno repeated calmly. Phil knelt next to them, holding out a little pad of soft gauzy fabric. Ranboo blinked at him slowly, his pupils flickering in size. He didn’t pull away when Phil wrapped the fabric around his hand, covering the cut gently. Ranboo warbled softly in the back of his throat.

“You’re alright,” Phil said. His tone was light, but Techno could hear the tension behind it. “Yeah?”

“I saw him,” Ranboo said. “I...” Techno released Ranboo’s wrists, and Ranboo pulled his hands back into his own space, looking at the gauze dazedly. “I thought...” Ranboo raised the back of one hand to wipe across his eyes. He stared at the gold that came away from his cheeks. “Sorry,” he mumbled softly.

“Don’t apologize,” Techno said, shaking his head slightly.

“I started feeling all numb and tingly and I thought– I thought I was...” Ranboo trailed off, like there was something he couldn’t say, something he wasn’t allowed to say, or wasn’t allowing himself to say. Techno knew what it was regardless.

He’d seen his blood, gold with the life of the Totem God, and believed he was dying again.

“I keep seeing him,” Ranboo murmured. “The Totem God. I keep seeing him everywhere, like he’s... like he’s always in the corner of my eye, but he’s not *here*.” Ranboo sighed shakily, steadying his breathing.

“No, he’s not,” Phil reassured him. “All of that’s over now.”

Ranboo nodded.

“I know,” he said, but he didn’t sound certain of it to Techno.

Though Techno supposed it must be difficult to be certain of anything still. He wondered what it was that Ranboo saw when he closed his eyes now, or when he saw the god from the corner of his eye; Techno had dreamt of those emerald eyes. He’d laid awake thinking of that blinding light. Sometimes, in the night, he heard that deafening sound echo out across the tundra, and he would bolt upright, left to wonder if it was only in his head.

“It’s just the gold, it…” Ranboo murmured, watching as Phil wound the bandage around his fingers carefully. “I don’t know. I see it and I’m… it’s like he’s here again.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re dying,” Phil said as he finished wrapping the gauze around Ranboo’s fingers. “It’s just how it is, now.” Ranboo nodded slowly. “If anything, it means you’re alive. This is what brought you back to us, right?” Phil placed his hand gently over Ranboo’s, and Ranboo nodded again.

“I guess,” he said quietly. His eyes lingered on the cutting board that still sat on the counter. There were a small few drops of gold on the wood.

“I’ll finish cutting the cherries if you want, mate,” Phil said.

“Okay,” Ranboo murmured. He bit the inside of his cheek, looking around the kitchen like he was remembering what he had been doing, reminding himself of what was going on before.

“Yeah, you can help me stir in this last bit of flour,” Techno offered. Ranboo paused, considering it for a moment. There was some disappointment in his eyes, but it passed

quickly.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Yeah.”

“You feel alright?” Techno asked. Ranboo nodded.

“I’m fine now,” Ranboo said. “Just... getting used to this, I guess,” he shrugged.

“Yeah,” Techno sighed. *Me too.*

The heat from the forge was intense, sweltering and dry and throwing out puffs of hot air that made Phil wonder if he was going to have eyebrows after this or if they would be singed off entirely. He kept his wings tucked close against his back, so tightly that they were beginning to ache, but his flight feathers were *finally* starting to bud and he wasn’t about to lose them again so soon. Or ever again, ideally.

Techno was hunched over the worktable. In front of him was a sword. He held tools in his hands, a chisel and a hammer, and he was slowly working on carving runes into the sword, line by line, curve by curve. Ranboo was at the other side of the table, holding onto the grip of the sword with one hand and using clamps around the tip with the other hand to keep it in place while Techno worked.

Phil resisted the urge to say *be careful* for the hundredth time, knowing that if he so much as opened his mouth at this point, Techno would probably throw him into the forge for fuel.

In the corner of the forge room, there was a pile of scrapped materials, old iron helmets and boots and chest pieces that Techno and Phil had collected over time and that were now being used as experiments, tests to see if they were on the right track.

Techno had managed to forge an iron axe that chopped wood faster than his netherite one, and Ranboo crafted a pair of boots that made water freeze over. Phil found that he was far better with potions, which was for the better, because neither Ranboo nor Techno wanted to see his feathers come anywhere near the heat of the forge.

“Let go of it for a sec,” Techno said to Ranboo, who nodded and released the clamp and his grip on the hilt. Techno picked the sword up off of the table and brought it over to the forge, heating it again in the fire. He had been teaching Ranboo how to use the forge while they worked on smaller projects, but for this one it seemed he wanted to do the firing himself.

“How many more runes?” Phil asked.

“Two,” Techno answered bluntly. Phil nodded. Techno had been practicing these engravings for the past few days, convinced he could make them work. On the first sword he’d tried, they hadn’t activated at all. On the second, the sword had a dull shimmer to it once the lapis was forged into the blade, but the effect of the Enchantment was nonexistent, like it was simply enchanted to do nothing. The third burst into flames while it was still on the workbench and then shattered into pieces. Phil had never been more grateful he pestered Techno and Ranboo so much about wearing work goggles.

Techno pulled his current sword out of the forge, bringing it back over to the table. It was red hot, making a slight squeaking sound against the metal of the work bench when he set it down. Ranboo went back to his position, holding the grip tightly and setting the clamps back over the tip.

Techno engraved the last two runes into the blade slowly, carefully, lining up each etching of the chisel with exact precision before he tapped the end with the hammer. He finished the last letter, one that looked like the number seven with a disconnected tail.

“Okay,” Techno said, leaning back. He set the tools down on the bench. “Okay. Phil, pass me the lapis.” Techno held out his hand, and Phil placed the small blue stone in his palm. Techno turned it over between his fingers, examining it carefully. Then, he placed it carefully into a little slot in the hilt of the sword, right at the guard.

When he did, the red edges of the sword seemed to shift, becoming more purple and catching the light in strange ways. The runes that Techno had painstakingly carved illuminated with

pulsing light. Techno and Ranboo both stood back a step, tensely waiting to see if the sword would shatter once again, but it didn't. The light of the runes faded into a dull glow.

Ranboo silently passed Techno a small hammer, and Techno tapped the edges of the inlay into place so it held the gem snugly in place. He brought the sword back over to the forge, running it through the heat for the last time before dunking it in one swift motion into the bucket of water that waited beside him.

There was a moment of silence between them as steam rose from the bucket and dissipated into the air, a mutual waiting. Finally, Techno drew the sword up from the bucket. It shimmered with purple, light bouncing off of it like the surface of water, and Phil felt like the air was a little less dense where they were standing.

"Fire sword," Techno said under his breath. His eyes seemed to glint with excitement.

"Did it work?" Ranboo asked hesitantly.

"Only one way to find out," Techno said, a smile growing on his face. He pulled the safety goggles off of his head, tossing them down onto a nearby table haphazardly. He was already making his way toward the door, but Phil stepped in front of it, letting one wing spread to block it fully.

"Armor. Now," he said, crossing his arms.

"But—" Techno began, but Phil cut him off.

"No buts. The last sword blew up." Techno groaned, tilting his whole head back and letting the sound rumble in his chest. Phil rolled his eyes. "What are you, twelve?"

"You're ruining the fun," Techno huffed. Ranboo passed him a chestplate and helmet, and Techno snatched it out of his hands with a grumble. Phil could see Ranboo holding back a smile.

“I’m ruining the chances of you dying, actually,” Phil replied.

“Same difference,” Techno sighed. He tugged the chestplate over his head regardless, and Phil moved out of his way to let him shoulder the door open. Ranboo walked out after him, walking beside Phil as they made their way outside.

“Think it’ll work this time?” Phil asked him. Ranboo furrowed his brow.

“Maybe,” he shrugged. “The engravings were right this time, I’m sure of it.”

“Well, that’s something,” Phil said. Ranboo hummed.

“I think if it works, we might actually see him cry,” he said quietly. Phil chuckled, shaking his head.

Outside, Techno pulled a thick piece of firewood from the pile at the side of the cabins, gripping it in one hand and carrying it over to the splitting log out back. He set it down, adjusting the position slightly so that it wouldn’t fall off, and stepped back.

“Please don’t light yourself on fire,” Phil called. He and Ranboo had both stopped a fair distance away.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Techno muttered.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Phil sighed, shaking his head. Ranboo stifled a laugh.

Techno rolled his shoulders back, standing back a few steps from the log. He eyed it carefully, tightening his grip on the sword, and with his other hand he adjusted his helmet.

Silently, Ranboo held onto the fabric of Phil's cloak in anticipation. It made Phil's heart swell just a bit.

Techno let out a long, slow breath, and then swung.

There was a burst of light and Phil felt heat tickle his skin, and then the smell of smoke filled his nose.

Phil waved a hand in front of his face, trying to clear the smoke away. He stepped forward, squinting his eyes to try to see through the cloud, his stomach tightening with worry.

"Techno!" He called. The smoke cleared slowly. "Tech?" He saw Techno standing, the sword in his hand smoking slightly. In front of him, the log lay on its side in the snow. It was on fire, the wood crackling as it burned. "Are you alright?"

"Fire sword," Techno replied.

"Wh— Tech, are you *okay*?" Phil repeated.

"*Fire sword*," Techno said in a hushed voice, a grin growing on his face. There were cinders sizzling in the snow and soot smudged on Techno's hands and chestplate. He looked down at the sword in his hand. There was a huge crack down the length of the sword, running straight through the runes, and the purplish shimmer was gone. Despite that, Techno seemed entirely intact and unharmed.

"What went wrong?" Ranboo asked, stepping cautiously closer.

"*Wrong*?" Techno repeated incredulously. "Nothing went *wrong*, did you *see* that?"

"Techno, that piece of wood practically blew up," Phil said, raising an eyebrow. "I'd call that *wrong*." Techno waved a hand at him.

“Semantics,” he muttered dismissively. “What’s the point of a fire sword if it doesn’t light things on fire? It did *exactly* what it was supposed to,” Techno said, examining the sword with pride. “I need a stronger blade,” he said to himself. “Stronger blade, maybe reinforced? But it’s *possible*...”

He continued muttering to himself under his breath, and Phil shook his head, but Techno had a grin on his face, beaming so hard that he could have put the sun to shame. Ranboo walked over to the flaming log, nudging it with the toe of his boot. The smoke had mostly cleared. The fire was melting the snow around it, sizzling slightly.

“These enchantments get better every time,” Phil noted. Ranboo nodded.

“You think someday we’ll be as good as Karl?” he asked softly, not looking up. “Probably not, right? I mean... he learned from his father, and we’re just... learning from books.”

“It’s certainly slow going without a mentor,” Phil shrugged. “But we’re keeping his legacy alive, don’t you think?” Phil couldn’t really tell from this angle, but he thought he saw the corners of Ranboo’s mouth twitch up in a smile.

“Yeah,” Ranboo agreed. “I guess that’s true.”

“I didn’t think you’d ever want to look at that again,” Techno said, looking over Ranboo’s shoulder. The kid was sat at the kitchen table, hunched over a pile of books. In front of him, three were open; his two memory books and Karl’s diary.

Ranboo looked up at him over his shoulder before sighing and looking back to the pages.

“I never really got to read them,” Ranboo murmured, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

It was late. Techno had fallen asleep on the couch a few hours ago, and when he woke up, there was a blanket over his shoulders and Phil was nowhere to be found. The lanterns in the living room were unlit, the only source of light in the cabin coming from the low-burning fireplace and the candle that Ranboo kept burning at the table with him.

“You weren’t missin’ much,” Techno sighed. He stretched his shoulders back and winced at the jolt of pain that went through his arm and neck. Phil had given him stretches to do to make sure that injury healed properly, and Techno had promptly forgotten to do them every day since.

“I wish we brought back the other diaries,” Ranboo said, leaning back in his chair. “This one is just...” He stared down at the last page of Karl’s book, the final lines jumbled and hastily written.

“Yeah,” Techno muttered. “We’ll go back for them. Don’t worry.” Ranboo nodded. “Did Phil go to bed?”

“Yeah, a while ago,” Ranboo replied. Techno hummed.

“I should probably—”

“Can I ask you about the—”

They spoke over each other accidentally. Ranboo snapped his mouth shut with a click, and Techno raised his eyebrows.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh. Nothing. I was going to... but if you want to go to bed, then—”

“What did you ask?” Techno repeated.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ranboo said, waving his hand noncommittally.

“Ranboo,” Techno said simply. Ranboo sighed.

“Can... can you tell me about the Butcher Army?” Techno blinked at him, feeling a sensation in his chest like his heart had just fallen from a window. “I... a while ago, you told me to remind you to tell me about it,” Ranboo explained. “So I...”

“Oh,” Techno sighed. “Oh, yeah. That was a long time ago. Guess you remembered, then.”

“Well, not really. It says it here... *remind Techno to tell you about the Butcher Army,*” Ranboo said, reading from the page, and when he was done he turned the notebook so that Techno could see the little footnote. Techno chuckled. “You don’t have to. And— and if you want to go to bed, then don’t—”

“No, no, I’ll tell you about it,” Techno said softly. “Took me off guard, that’s all. Forgot I’d even mentioned that to you.” Ranboo put the memory book back down on the table, turning to the next page for a moment before flipping back.

“I don’t have anything else written about it,” he said. “And I couldn’t remember anything like that being in the history books...”

“No, you wouldn’t... it wouldn’t be in any history books,” Techno said. Ranboo looked up at him expectantly. Techno sighed. “I’m— do you want tea? I’m gonna make tea.”

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t—”

“Ranboo, I’m just askin’ if you want tea.”

Ranboo closed his mouth, considered the offer for a moment, and then nodded. Techno smiled at him. He walked to the kitchen, lighting the stove and setting the kettle down on top of the burner.

“First thing’s first, the word *army* is pretty misleadin’ here,” Techno explained. He didn’t have to turn to face Ranboo to know the kid was listening intently. “It was, like, *at most* four dudes with swords.”

He pulled two mugs off of a shelf above his head. He blew off any dust that might’ve been inside them and set them on the counter. When he did, he ran his tongue over his bottom teeth, lingering on the top of the now-fractured canine, and he paused. Now that he was really committing himself to remembering, the memory felt sharper than he was expecting.

“This was a pretty long time ago,” he continued. “A few years after Phil and I met. We were travelling together.”

Techno made tea slowly, putting the leaves into the strainer and running the water over it carefully. As he did, he told Ranboo about the little village he and Phil had settled in so long ago, not the first they’d stayed in for an extended period of time, but certainly the last. It was a small village, smaller than the east village, tucked in a valley off somewhere warm.

It used to be bigger, they were told. It used to be bustling, a major point of trade if the old ledgers were anything to go off of. It was built around a mineshaft, and even after the population dwindled, the villagers would mine coal and iron and gold and anything else they could unearth and they would trade it for food and supplies, because it was difficult to grow anything in the shade of the valley.

It was in this village that Techno uncovered his skills at the forge. He made tools, pickaxes and swords and shields and armor for the miners to wear when they ventured deeper into the more dangerous parts of the mine. He and Phil worked hard to earn their stay.

For a while, it was good. It was food and shelter and community, even though the villagers were hesitant about the two hybrids at first, they warmed up. They came to trust each other with time.

“It didn’t last,” Techno said solemnly, passing a cup of tea into Ranboo’s hands. Ranboo took it, raising his eyebrows. He blew on the beverage, watching steam rise from the cup as Techno sat down at the kitchen table with him.

“Why?”

“Greed.”

Techno was never sure who started it. That was the worst part, always, the not knowing. The mining village often traded with a nearby farming village for food and other materials, and at some point, the trade turned sour. Someone was unhappy with someone else, the prices were wrong, it was too much, too little, not enough, who knows. In the end, all that really mattered was that tension.

There were talks of negotiation. The mining village would send some of their own people to discuss prices, to come to an agreement. They chose a leader, a diplomat, someone who could speak for them all; his name was Quackity. He had charisma, they said. But Techno had been skeptical.

And what if you don’t come to an agreement? Techno had asked. *What then?*

Then we fight for what’s ours, Quackity said.

“He knew I didn’t want a fight,” Techno muttered. “I wasn’t going to be a soldier. I told him as much. You know what he said to me?” Ranboo said nothing. “He said, *you don’t get to decide.*”

You’re not one of us, anyway.

They didn’t reach an agreement. They reached a mutual understanding, though; neither would back down, and neither would concede. There would be no white flags. There would only be a victor and a pile of rubble on which he stood.

When Quackity returned home, he told the village to prepare for war. He told Techno to light the forge, to craft swords and axes and shields, armor, barricades, whatever they needed. He told him they needed him, needed him to fight, needed him to win.

“They were gonna kill each other, Ranboo,” Techno sighed. “With swords *I* made. I didn’t want any part of it. I had never agreed to it in the first place.”

“They wanted to use you,” Ranboo said quietly.

Techno nodded.

“Like a weapon.”

And when they realized they couldn’t, then it was over.

Techno refused. He wouldn’t become involved in the conflict, a conflict he had no part in, no say over, no choice to enact. Techno refused, and Phil stood by Techno, and so they both stood above it all and watched the inevitable unfold.

And they blamed him, because of course they did. Because how could anything else be to blame. How could anyone else be at fault. They were bitter, and their bitterness was only encouraged by Quackity; no longer welcome, no longer home. He said they had profited off of their war, benefitted from their downfall, they were never one of *them* , not really.

“All they wanted was someone to blame,” Techno said, his eyes distant. “That’s all it took.”

Quackity gathered what forces he had left, called them the Butcher Army.

“Like butchering a pig. Get it? Funny joke.”

Ranboo didn't laugh.

They tried to kill him. There was no hesitation, no second guessing. Despite everything.

"So what... what happened?" Ranboo asked after a long pause. Techno had stopped talking, staring down into his tea cup. There were little flecks of leaves floating in it. Techno never understood how Phil could make a cup of tea so perfectly. When he did it, there were always imperfections. He sighed.

"I put a pickaxe through his teeth," Techno said simply. "Phil and I left. We decided we would settle somewhere on our own. It was... it was a close call. Too close for comfort."

"Oh," Ranboo sighed softly. "Sounds like something that *should* be in a history book," Ranboo said after a moment. Techno laughed.

"Maybe you can write it," he said, shaking his head. He took another sip of tea.

"Maybe I will," Ranboo hummed. "Maybe someday, someone will find it and read it."

"Yeah, maybe they'll build me a shrine and make sacrifices," Techno chuckled. "*Blood for the Blood God.*"

"I thought you didn't like that name?" Ranboo asked.

"Better than worshipping a fool," Techno shrugged. Ranboo hummed and took a sip of his tea. Techno looked down at the memory book that was still open in front of Ranboo. It was turned to a new page, now, with fresh writing, notes from Techno's story jotted down hastily on the paper. Techno smiled. Maybe now it could just be that; history.

“You know,” Ranboo started, “every time you tell me more about your past, I understand more and more why you didn’t like me at first.” Techno chuckled.

“I didn’t *not like* you, I just... I didn’t *trust* you,” he said.

“Sure, sure,” Ranboo teased.

“Look, in my defense, you *did* have an actual *demon* hangin’ out in your head, kid,” Techno shrugged, and then realized what he’d said. He and Ranboo looked at each other for a long moment with nothing but silence between them, until finally, Ranboo raised his eyebrows.

“You know what, that’s fair,” he said, raising his mug into the air like he was making a toast. Techno shook his head, raising his own mug as well, and they both drank. Ranboo set his cup down on the table, a poorly hidden smile growing on his face.

“You think if we wrote this all down in a history book, and someday a couple hundred years from now someone found it, would anyone believe it?” Techno asked. Ranboo considered the question for a moment.

“Would you?” He asked instead of answering. *I hardly even believe it now.*

“Nah,” Techno replied. “But I’m a skeptic.” Ranboo smiled, nodding.

“I think I would believe it,” he said.

“I figured you’d say that.”

“Why’s that?”

“You see the best in people.”

“What does that have to do with it?” Ranboo asked.

“Everything,” Techno answered.

It had felt so real, just like always, right until the moment he opened his eyes. It was never a dream when it was happening. It was always a real fear, a real pain, a real danger, right up until he woke up with his heart hammering in his chest and his body trembling and he would run his hands over his face like a reminder of who he was. Right up until then, it was real.

But then, when his eyes adjusted to the dark and he looked out the window at the snow and he saw the outline of his hands in shadow, it became what it was; a dream. Nothing more. Never anything more. Never again spilling over into his reality, never haunting him past the sunrise, never again.

That was real. That *never*. He reminded himself of it again and again, each time he woke up and each time he closed his eyes. *Never again*. He reminded himself of it as he stilled his breathing, as he slowly banished the tightness from his chest, as he forced air into his lungs. *Never again*, even as the flashes of dark claws reached for him in his memory and as the blinding golden light surrounded him. *Never again*.

On nights like these, nights that came often, nights that sometimes came one after another after another, he would light a lantern, add a log to the fire in the living room, sit and watch the fire burn until the sun rose. Sometimes, he would ask for help. Most times, help would find him regardless of whether he asked or not.

But on this night, he would try something new. On this night, he would wake from this nightmare alone, and he would breathe alone, and he would remind himself of this reality alone, just to see if he could. Just to make sure he could. Just to make sure he really believed it himself.

On this night, he would walk out into the dark living room, and he wouldn't add another log to the fire, and he wouldn't make his way upstairs. He would go outside. He would remember to put on his boots, first, and he wouldn't knock gently on anyone's door. He would walk across the snow, listen for the crisp little crunch that his footsteps made, revel in the bite of the wind on his cheeks, and he would find himself standing in a meadow of grass that never died and never dulled or wilted or withered away.

On this night, he would sit where a pyre once burned, and he would dig his hands into the soil and close his eyes and imagine the ash, imagine the embers, imagine it burning and blazing and smouldering and then dying away until it was this, until it was nothing, until it was real.

"Ranboo?" He heard Techno call his name. With a soft sigh, he turned to him.

"I'm alright," Ranboo called. Techno paused for a moment before nodding.

"Okay," he said, closing the distance between them slowly.

Techno's boots crunched in the snow until he got to the meadow, and then the sound of his footsteps was muffled in the grass. Ranboo could see it when he felt the temperature change. His shoulders relaxed, lowering from their hunched position at his ears, and he let his arms fall to his sides, taking a deep breath in.

"What're you, uh..." Techno started, looking around for a moment. "What are you doing out here?" he asked, glancing down at the dirt that was still smudged on Ranboo's hands and stuck under his nails.

"I had a nightmare," Ranboo said simply, brushing some of the soil off onto his pants.

"Oh," Techno said. He came to a halt next to Ranboo and looked down at the grass for a moment before deciding to sit. "What about?"

Ranboo shrugged, looking down at his hands.

“Dream,” he sighed. “Foolish. Dying. You know.”

“Yeah,” Techno nodded. He flopped down, laying on his back in the grass. “I know.” Ranboo held back a sad smile. He knew Techno had nightmares about it too, even if he didn’t mention them. Phil, too. How could they not? But it was still nice, not needing to explain himself. They all just knew.

“Did I wake you up?” Ranboo asked. Techno shook his head.

“Nah,” he said. “I was awake. Saw you out the window and– well it actually reminded me of a while ago, around when you first got here,” Techno explained. “And you were sleepwalkin’ out in the snow, completely barefoot in your pajamas. You remember that?”

“Kind of,” Ranboo said. Techno hummed.

“Good times,” he sighed. “I see you remembered your boots this time. Thought for a second you were...”

“I’m alright,” Ranboo repeated.

“I know,” Techno said. “You can wake us up, you know,” he continued. “If you need to.” Ranboo hummed, nodding.

He’d woken them up before. Sometimes, or rather often, unintentionally. He’d make that wail in his sleep, the one they said they could feel in their own heads. Before, these nightmares would have left him shaking and crying and clinging to anything he could get his hands on that would remind him he was alive and safe. He needed to know he was *here*. Nothing could convince him of that until he saw them, Phil and Techno, there safe with him.

But time went on, and when he woke up now, he felt that fear fade faster and faster with each passing day. It was still just as strong, just as sharp, but it passed through him now where before it lodged in his chest like an arrow.

Perhaps it was the passing of time that was finally convincing him that this was real. Each new sun that rose was a reminder, each night that fell a new challenge. And when he opened his eyes on dawn, it was another day where the dust remained settled. Slowly, numbly, it was all becoming a fossil, buried under layers of time and crushed into something smaller with every hour, condensed, compact, identifiable as something of the past, something to be unburied or unearthed or exhumed. It was in the ash that fertilized new growth. It was in the dirt under his nails.

"I'm proud of you, kid," Techno said, so quietly that Ranboo almost didn't hear him.

Ranboo turned his head to look at him. Techno had his eyes closed, his face illuminated by the soft moonlight. It glinted off of his broken tooth. Ranboo thought he might have imagined, that maybe Techno was asleep, but then he opened his eyes and stared straight above him at the stars.

"You know that, right?" Techno asked. "You've come so far, and you're still standin'."

"Well, technically right now I'm sitting," Ranboo shrugged. Techno turned to him slowly, blinking at him.

"You're really gonna ruin the moment, huh?"

"Sorry, sorry," Ranboo said, holding back a laugh. Techno smiled, rolling his eyes and looking back at the sky.

"Come on, I was bein' real—" Techno chuckled.

“I know, I know, I’m—” Ranboo smiled, shaking his head. “Sorry. I... thank you,” he added quietly.

“I mean it,” Techno said. “All this, it... it's all still here because you didn't give up.” Ranboo felt warmth bubble in his chest. He didn't know how to answer. He wanted to tell Techno he was wrong, he wasn't strong, he was just selfish; he was just afraid. But he was never *just*. There was always something driving him.

“I didn't give up because of you,” Ranboo murmured. “You and Phil. If you hadn't...” Ranboo let his sentence drift off. He didn't want to go too far down that rabbit hole. There were too many moments it all could have gone wrong, too many paths they could have gone down where everything was different. “Thank you.” Techno smiled.

“It's been a wild ride, huh?” he muttered, closing his eyes again.

“You could say that,” Ranboo replied. He looked back down at the dirt under his nails.

“But here we are.”

“Yeah.”

The breeze in the meadow was warm, kicking up golden flecks of pollen as it drifted through aimlessly. Ranboo smiled, sifting his hands through the soil again. His claws cut through it easily. He held it neatly, the clumps remaining intact until he released his grip and the dirt fell through his fingers.

“Here we are.”

Things fell into a rhythm over time.

In the mornings, the sun would rise over the tundra, bouncing light off of the ice and snow. They would wake slowly, and Phil would make tea while Ranboo cooked breakfast, and Techno would come over and pick up a few pieces of toast or bacon or eggs before making his way out to tend to the crops. Ranboo put feed out for the cows and Phil checked their water troughs.

They canned food or polished armor or washed clothes or sheets or dishes, chopped firewood, gathered wild berries and roots and herbs, hunted deer and set traps for rabbits, foraged for mushrooms. When the nights were cold, they covered the crops with thick tarps and lit blazing fires in the hearth and sat with each other in silence, reading books or cooking or simply existing.

Once, while they were dusting off the shelves and window sills and countertops in Phil's cabin, Ranboo discovered, or rediscovered, the shattered dark green gemstone he'd found when he first explored the house.

"I just thought it was a fancy rock," Phil had said, examining the pearl in his hand. "I had no idea what it was."

It made sense now why Ranboo had felt so drawn to it, but then again, so much now made sense in hindsight. They tucked the pearl away with a few other artifacts that reminded them a bit too much of things they'd rather not remember, next to that last fragment of the old shattered sword and the first memory book and a cracked prong from a trident.

On one dark, windy night, lightning cracked through the swirling purple clouds overhead. It lit up the tundra with flashes of white. On that night, Techno made his way to Phil's cabin, the prospect of listening to the cracks of thunder and watching the energy pulse through the sky *alone* too much to bear, and when he entered, he found Phil and Ranboo already huddled together on the couch.

Phil had silently offered Techno a mug of tea and stretched out his wing, an invitation, and Techno obliged without a second thought.

The flight feathers on Phil's wings grew in eventually, thick and strong and slightly lighter in color than they were before, dotting his dark wings with patterns of light grey. He preened them until they practically shone in the sun, and when he finally flew for what felt like the first time in a lifetime, nothing could have stifled the joy in his whoops and calls.

Sometimes, when the weather was bad, Techno would favor his right arm over his left. Some days, when the sun was high and bright overhead, Ranboo would pause to examine the glittering gold scars that dotted his skin. Some nights, when the tundra was quiet, Phil would stay awake and brew potions of healing and regeneration and strength, just in case, tucking them away in a chest under his bed. Just in case. Just in case.

It was a sunny morning when Phil decided it was time to venture out on a trip to get supplies; they were in need of spices and vegetables and iron and coal, and it was time, Phil decided, to go back to the east village. To test the waters, to explain, to see if they could understand. He could fly, now. He could go alone, just for the day. He could take with him the pearl, the diary.

"What will you tell them?" Techno had asked.

"The truth," Phil replied. "What more is there to tell?"

Ranboo wouldn't get his hopes up; he pushed down the hope he felt. He watched Phil take off into the air, watched him beat his wings over the treetops until he seemed to disappear, watched the empty sky afterwards as though Phil might come back right away, turn around, say he changed his mind, say there was no way they would forgive or forget.

He didn't expect them to do either. But he hoped. Despite how hard he pushed that feeling down, he hoped.

"Come help me with somethin'," Techno had offered. Anything to pass the time. Ranboo obliged.

They worked the day away until the sun began to slowly set in the sky, and from Techno's kitchen, Ranboo's ears twitched when he heard the familiar beating of wings. He almost

tripped over himself to get outside, throwing the door open without even grabbing his cloak.

Phil touched down, his wings sending up a cloud of snow as he did. He brushed himself off, shaking out his wings as he did and rubbing his hands together to stave off the cold. Phil had mentioned it was always colder while flying. Something about the wind and the height and the sweat that cooled him down.

When Ranboo saw him, he slowed to a stop, standing in the snow in front of the cabins and waiting, unable to ask what he so desperately wanted to. Techno walked out beside him, throwing a cloak around Ranboo's shoulders as he walked by, making his way toward Phil.

"Phil, *look*," Techno called, and before Phil could answer, he threw a potion bottle against the ground.

The glass shattered easily, spraying the contents over his boots. The liquid shimmered in the sun, and seemed to creep up his pant legs and onto his shirt and skin like ice covering a window. He stood there, glittering, with a grin on his face like he'd just accomplished some great feat.

"Uh... shiny," Phil said, a confused smile on his face. "Was that..." Phil said, folding his wings against his back. "Was that supposed to do something?"

"What?" Techno asked, and then looked down at his hands, turning them over to look at his palms and then looking back up at Phil. "Oh, man... It was supposed to make me invisible," he said dejectedly.

"Aw," Phil tutted. He walked by Techno, patting him on the shoulder. "You're invisible to me, mate."

"Hey—" Techno grunted, but Phil cut him off.

"I brought you pumpkin pastries," he said, and Techno left his mouth hanging open for a moment before shaking himself back to thought.

"Wait, wait, they– you–" Techno stumbled over his words.

"They traded with me," Phil nodded. There was a smile on his face as he turned to look at Ranboo, and Ranboo felt the hope that was burning in his chest grow stronger, like a bonfire waiting to consume him.

"So does that mean..." Ranboo said, but he couldn't finish the sentence. Phil understood, though.

"Yeah," he sighed, smiling. "There's some rules, of course, and Maria and Rose would like to talk to you..."

Ranboo felt almost like this was a dream, like he couldn't possibly have this chance at redemption, at a second chance, at a fresh start. He pinched his thumbnail against the side of his finger, and it felt sharp, and he was awake. The world seemed brighter, now. There was more light. He wondered if it had always been like that, though.

"We can go back, if you want," Phil said, resting his hand on Ranboo's shoulder. "Do you want to?"

Chapter End Notes

longest chapter to date :) can you believe there's only one more? I sure can't. Literally bonkers. Totally ridiculous. Wowza. All that's left is the epilogue... :)))

The epilogue isn't going to be crazy long, def not as long as this chapter lol but it's a wrap up of everything. And maybe,, a little twist. One last one. But I promise you'll like it. After all, I DID add "angst with a happy ending" to the tags, after all.

ALSO BIG BIG NEWS!!! The first chapter of my next fic, "It's Called: Freefall," will be posted WITHIN THE NEXT FEW DAYS!! I'm making final edits on the first chapter tomorrow so it will come out VERY SOON! "It's Called: Freefall" is going to be an SBI

centric foster fic that focuses on Tommy after he's been removed from a dangerous household and follows the course of trials for his brother (Dream :0) and his mom while he's placed with Phil, an emergency foster for high-need short-term placement, Phil's adopted son Wilbur, and Phil's former-foster-kid-now-family-friend-slash-roommate (its fun i swear) Techno. So if you like SBI, benchtrio, found family, angst, hurt comfort, and drama, stay tuned :)

but anyway. back to your regularly scheduled programming.

thanks for reading :) I'm super excited for the epilogue of this fic and I am still in shock at how close we are to being done, and how much support I've gotten along the way. Yall are amazing. Thanks for sticking with me.

Let me know what you thought of this chapter in the comments below!! A lot happened!!! We love that comfort. The fluff. The domesticity.

And if you don't want to comment, consider leaving a kudos! it's like twitch prime but for ao3... free and easy way to support your authors <3

As always, updates on how the next chapter is coming along will be posted here in this end note as I go!

12/8 - YO!! chapter one of It's Called: Freefall is posted!!! check it out!!! also, im working on the epilogue!! :')

12/9 - hey :) the visage epilogue will be posted tomorrow, friday the 10th, at 8:15 :) im gonna cry :) yall better cry with me :)))

12/10 - hey. final end notes update :) the chapter is ready to go. see you at 8:15 est. bring ur tissues. i know i'll be crying.

Because You Are Love

Chapter Summary

“It was a lot snowier last time,” Ranboo noted quietly. Phil tilted his head back to look at him briefly before glancing around him at the woods.

“It’s gotten warmer,” he nodded. “It’s nice.” Phil stretched his wings out wide until they almost touched the trees on either side of the path. The black and grey feathers were shiny, tucked neatly against each other. Even though the pattern had been interrupted by the new growth, they were still stunning. Ranboo watched with curiosity as he folded them against his back again. Even after all this time, he still wondered what it felt like to fly.

“I didn’t think we’d ever go back,” Ranboo said. “Or... I didn’t think I’d go back,” he added quietly. Phil chuckled.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Entry, 44 of Spring, 29th Year

My Father likes to tell this history as though it were a bed-time story told to a child, or a fable to repeat for some moral purpose. He has never been one to find comfort in such things, very much a cynicist when it comes to the joys one finds in the world, or lack thereof. Or perhaps a realist. I know of what he’s seen.

But in any case, when he recites the history of the Haunting, I swear I see a glimmer in his eyes, as much as he would never admit it. And so when he asks me if I remember the story for the hundredth time, I tell him to remind me, so that I might hear it a hundred more just to see that glimmer again.

And so he tells it.

The endermen, he says, were not always social creatures. There was a time when they were nothing more than ships passing in the night, never interacting. It was considered good luck

to see a pair, a rare sight, one that meant good fortune.

They had no reason to flock to each other. Their hearts were tied to the void, to the End, not to one another the way our human hearts are tied to one another.

But when the end was sealed off, when their pearls shattered and that connection was cut so swiftly it was like a great tree felled in one swing, they were left with nothing to hold them down to this place. They were empty, alone, isolated, so agonizingly abandoned that it hurt, that they wailed into the night, that their calls carried out across the world and in that moment, the world sang with them, a song of despair.

Then, my father says, after they mourned, after their song rang and echoed and faded, then they found each other.

If the void could not hold them any longer, they would hold each other. They gathered, slowly, traveling and finding those like them, drawn together by some unknown instinct. They sought comfort. They sought home.

My father says this is why the haunting finds itself so precious, holding its community above all else. They are connected to each other, now, just as they were once connected to the End. When one sings, all sing. When one feels pain, all feel pain. When one dies, all mourn as though they have died themselves.

They are inseparable. They will never stop looking for that sense of home. For each other. To be one. You see?

“It’s a little nostalgic, don’t you think?” Phil asked. He fluffed his wings out behind him, dusting the snowy trail with his flight feathers.

“Oh, yeah, so nostalgic,” Techno drawled, “So many good memories from last time.”

Phil swept the end of his feathers through the snow, flicking a spray of snow up into Techno's face. Techno tried to leap out of the way, but the snow scattered across his cloak and into his hood, and he swiped vigorously at the back of his neck trying to keep it from falling down his back.

"Okay, okay, sorry," he muttered, wiping his hand across his pants. "I was just sayin'."

Ranboo found it hard to concentrate on their conversation, though. He looked around him at the forest, taking in every detail as though he was seeing it for the first time. It seemed greener, crisper, like the lines were sharper at the edges of the leaves and the trees stretched just a little taller. He reached out, brushing his hand against a stray pine branch that hung over the path. Little flecks of ice and snow bounced off of the needles, making the skin on the back of his hand tingle.

"It was a lot snowier last time," Ranboo noted quietly. Phil tilted his head back to look at him briefly before glancing around him at the woods.

"It's gotten warmer," he nodded. "It's nice." Phil stretched his wings out wide until they almost touched the trees on either side of the path. The black and grey feathers were shiny, tucked neatly against each other. Even though the pattern had been interrupted by the new growth, they were still stunning. Ranboo watched with curiosity as he folded them against his back again. Even after all this time, he still wondered what it felt like to fly.

"I didn't think we'd ever go back," Ranboo said. "Or... I didn't think *I'd* go back," he added quietly. Phil chuckled.

"You should have seen Ilya when I got there," he said. "All he wanted to know was that you were okay." Ranboo ducked his head, biting the inside of his cheek. "What are you nervous about?" Phil asked.

"What?" Ranboo replied, startled.

“I can practically *hear* you worrying,” Phil sighed, offering Ranboo a sympathetic smile. “They invited us back, mate. It’s not like we’re showing up out of the blue.”

“Yeah, Phil already did that part,” Techno said. Phil shot him a look. “Literally,” Techno muttered quietly.

“Techno—” Phil warned, and Techno raised his hands in surrender. Phil sighed deeply.

“I know,” Ranboo said. “I’m just... how do I look them in the eye after everything that happened last time?”

“You weren’t yourself then,” Phil replied, as though it would suddenly fix everything.

“I’m still *me*, ” Ranboo muttered. “I know what they said, that... that it’s okay, but... I’m still me. What if they see me and they take it back, or they don’t trust me anymore, or—”

“Then we go home,” Techno said bluntly. Ranboo blinked at him. “Sometimes you can’t fix everything. But you’ve got us.”

“Nothing to lose, right?” Phil asked, and Ranboo took a slow breath, letting it out with a nod.

“I guess,” he sighed. “Just— I know a lot has changed, but it doesn’t *look* like it, you know?”

“Ranboo, you literally bleed gold now,” Techno said with a smirk.

“Oh, yeah, sure, I’ll just *bleed* on them. That’ll do it,” Ranboo mumbled, rolling his eyes.

“Couldn’t hurt to try,” Techno shrugged, and Phil whacked him on the side of his arm. Ranboo held back a smile. He shook his head, looking back to the path in front of them.

As much as Phil had assured Ranboo that the villagers were welcoming him back (or at the very least, open to the idea of his return), somehow he still just couldn't wrap his head around it. They had known him so briefly, and he'd done nothing but cause chaos. He couldn't help but think it was too good to be true.

But that fear had consumed him for too long. It had boiled in his chest from the moment he saw Dream's pyre, a feeling like this couldn't possibly be over, not after everything. Not after it had been so much for so long. *It's done*, he reminded himself. *It's over*.

As Ranboo watched the trail, he began to notice something moving in the distance, a little spec at first, slowly growing larger. He wondered at first if it was a fox, or maybe a wolf, as Techno had warned them about the last time they walked this trail. It felt like years ago, and somehow also like it was yesterday.

It wasn't a fox, or a wolf; as it drew closer, Techno and Phil noticed it as well. Ranboo could tell the moment Techno saw it by the way his hand moved deftly to rest on his axe, not drawing quite yet, just ready. Ranboo squinted, watching as the figure drew closer. It was a person, he thought, approaching too quickly to be a mob and not low to the ground enough to be an animal. It bobbed up and down slightly, like it was running.

"What is it?" Phil asked. His wings stretched out, tensing.

"I don't know," Techno said. "I don't have my glasses on."

"God, mate, the fact you haven't died yet is a miracle," Phil scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"Guess I'm just immensely talented and strong," Techno shrugged. He kept his hand on his axe.

"Or lucky," Ranboo said.

“Or lucky,” Techno huffed. The figure drew closer, and for a moment, it looked familiar. Ranboo’s ears twitched back, his head tilting slightly, and then they heard it call out.

“Ranboo!”

Ranboo froze where he stood.

“Mr. Philza! Mr. Techno!” the voice called. “Ranboo!”

“Ilya,” Ranboo breathed.

“Ilya?” Phil asked, and he leaned forward, squinting his eyes. “Ilya!” Phil hollered, “That you?” Ilya drew closer, sprinting at them as fast as his legs could carry him. Slowly, his features came into view, a mop of brown hair on his head and a light cloak billowing out behind him as he ran. He just laughed in response, a clear laugh that rang out between the trees. For some reason, it made Ranboo’s breath catch in his throat.

“What’s he doin’ out here?” Techno asked, clearly not expecting an answer. Phil shrugged. Techno removed his hand from his axe, shaking his head. They could hear Ilya’s breath now, labored from his mad sprint, and when he was close enough that they could see his face clearly, he slowed, looking between the three of them with wide eyes, his chest heaving.

Ranboo blinked at him, his lips half parted. Words were suddenly lost. Everything he had wanted to say, everything he’d rehearsed, repeated a thousand times to himself just that morning, it was all gone. Ilya stood in front of him, panting, one hand across his stomach and half bent over trying to catch his breath, and the sight stole the words from right off of his tongue.

He remembered seeing blood on his hands. He remembered the scream. He remembered the look in the golem’s eyes, the look in *all* of their eyes, the betrayal, the moment they realized he’d lied, the moment he was no longer just himself, he was other, he was something to be fixed, to be solved—

Ilya threw himself at Ranboo. He leapt up, wrapping his arms around Ranboo's neck, burying his head into Ranboo's chest, his legs dangling. Ranboo froze for a moment, stumbling back a step to keep his balance, but as Ilya clung to him, he felt those memories slowly dull. He hugged him back, wrapping his long arms around the boy, holding him close like he was an old friend. Ilya laughed again, the sound muffled against Ranboo's chest.

Ranboo looked up and found Phil's eyes watching him, a smile on the man's face, a silent *told you so* gleaming in his eyes.

Then Ilya released his hold, dropping back down to the snow with a soft grunt, and he looked up at Ranboo, beaming.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Ilya said, still out of breath. "I told Mr. Philza, I told him— I knew you'd be okay. I *knew* it. I told my mom, as long as he's with Mr. Philza and Mr. Techno, he'll be okay. They'll figure it out together," he panted.

"Ilya—" Ranboo started, but Ilya cut him off.

"And you don't need to explain! Mr. Philza told me *everything* – or, well, probably not everything. But the important parts!"

"Ilya—" Ranboo tried again, but the kid wasn't interested in letting him speak.

"And now you've got these *sick* gold scars," he said, reaching for Ranboo's hand. Ranboo let him take it, flipping it over to see where there was a thick gold line running across his palm and four fingers. "You're all shiny and cool. I've got a cool scar too, though! Emmet says it makes me look *tough*."

Ilya held out his arm, and Ranboo felt his blood run cold. On his forearm, there was a mottling of scars, crescent shaped and raised and pinkish. Ones Ranboo had given him. Ranboo pulled his ears back, his tail wrapping itself around his leg. He reached out, fingers hovering just over Ilya's arm, but he didn't dare touch it. Ilya stared up at him with big brown eyes.

“It’s okay, see?” Ilya said quietly. “It’s all healed now.” His voice was gentle. Ranboo let his fingers graze over the raised scars. Ilya’s skin was warm. “See?”

“Ilya, I—” Ranboo began, and again, Ilya cut him off.

“It’s okay,” he said firmly. “You’re gonna apologize, right?” Ranboo closed his mouth with a click. “You don’t need to. It wasn’t you.” He said it with more certainty than Ranboo had ever said it himself; *it wasn’t me. It wasn’t. It’s me now*. Ranboo nodded, effectively silenced. Even if he tried to apologize, Ilya would just cut him off again. Maybe it was better.

“What’re you doin’ out here, kid?” Techno asked. Immediately, Ilya’s face lit up again with new energy.

“Oh!” He said, practically jumping up on his toes. “Oh. Okay— you see— okay—” He caught himself, shaking his head. “Wait, no. Okay.”

“Uh huh,” Techno nodded sagely. “I see.”

“No, no,” Ilya laughed. “It’s a *surprise*. ”

“Not a fan of surprises,” Techno said lightheartedly, but Ilya shook his head.

“You’ll like this one,” he assured them. “I promise. Come on!” Without warning, he grabbed Ranboo’s hand, dragging him forward from where he’d frozen in the snow. Ranboo stumbled forward to keep up. He had to keep his back hunched so Ilya could keep a hold of his hand. He looked to Phil for any sign of an answer, but Phil just shrugged.

“I don’t know what he’s on about,” Phil said. “Don’t look at me.”

“It happened after you left!” Ilya said to Phil. *It?* “This is *new*. Come on!”

“We’re right behind you, bud,” Phil laughed, shaking his head.

Ilya dragged the three of them down the path back toward the village, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. Slowly, the woods thinned out. There was the same axe they saw last time lodged into an old tree stump, slowly rusting away. They could see chimney smoke. With each step that passed, Ranboo felt his chest grow tighter.

There would be so many eyes on him, boring into him, examining him, scrutinizing, judging, wondering, distrusting. He didn’t know if he could do this. He didn’t know if he could look Rose or Maria in the eye, if he could see the little kids clinging to their parents legs when they saw him. He held tight to Ilya, and Ilya squeezed his hand as though he knew exactly what Ranboo was thinking. He could probably take a solid guess if he tried. From the looks Techno and Phil gave Ranboo, he figured they knew what he was thinking, too.

They saw the remnants of an old shed, firewood stacked in little bundles, a sign nailed to a tree, the letters now impossible to read. They could see roofs peaking between the trees. They could see the fence that bordered the village. But even if Ranboo wanted to dig in his heels or freeze up or overthink, Ilya pulled him onward, ever onward, toward the sounds of talking and plumes of smoke and life, a grin plastered onto his face.

There was a sound, then.

A sound that felt like cracking a knuckle.

It was startling. Ranboo let go of Ilya’s hand, straightening his back. His ears twitched, and his tail flicked from side to side behind him, sweeping through the snow. Something in his chest was suddenly heavy, a pull. His steps slowed to a stop. Techno and Phil looked to each other, but Ranboo could only stare ahead.

“Come on,” Ilya whispered excitedly. He took Ranboo’s hand again. Ranboo felt like his legs were suddenly numb. “Ranboo, *come on*,” the boy repeated.

He heard the sound again. A soft sound, crackly and musical, a hum, a warble. It floated up over the trees and sunk deep into the ground and rang in Ranboo's ears. He felt his heart beat hard, pulling him forward. He felt numb, felt frozen but not cold, felt something telling him to wait, telling him to listen. *Look*, it said. *Look*.

Ranboo took one step, then another, strange half steps like a calf being led forward on unfamiliar terrain, forward. There were sounds coming from the village, familiar sounds, voices and laughter and life, and sounds that were more than familiar, warbles and chirps and trills that stuck in the back of Ranboo's skull like honey, *look*.

"Look," Ilya said as they drew closer. "See?" Ranboo saw. He saw the village, the fences, the cobblestone and wood column houses, the pathways that ran between them. He saw the villagers, their faces familiar like he'd seen them in a dream before. He saw them turn when they heard them coming.

He saw the charcoal black creatures standing among them, tall and thin, gangly arms and long fingers hanging loosely at their sides, cloaked in woollen hoods. They turned as well, their eyes suddenly boring into him, *look. Look. See?*

"They showed up the day after Mr. Philza came," Ilya said, though his voice sounded to Ranboo like it was a thousand miles away. "We didn't know what they were, but they seemed familiar, and..." A soft, curious warble rang out from the village. "They knew your name."

Look.

See?

Do you see now?

Ranboo felt the air leave his lungs like someone else was breathing for him. They turned and they saw and their eyes were bright, bright like the End was dark, familiar like he had never forgotten.

We never stopped looking.

See?

Ranboo opened his mouth, but all that escaped was a low warble, a melody contained within him, a song of longing and memory and guilt.

They sang it back to him.

He knew them. He could name them. Eve, Noctia, Saesha, Edward. They stretched their open palms toward him.

See? We never stopped looking.

Phil rested a hand on Ranboo's shoulder, rubbing his thumb back and forth gently.

“Go,” Phil said softly. “Go to them.”

Why do you cry?

You look just like how we remember.

Has so little changed?

Chapter End Notes

“and the universe said I love you because you are love.”

—

well... that's a wrap :) that's all I got. It's over. Really, truly over.

A few things; as an author finishing a long fic, I feel obliged to talk your ear off in the end notes.

First of all, thank you all for reading and commenting and leaving kudos or bookmarking or adding this to your collections or showing this to your friends or making art... I can't believe how much this fic has grown. I never imagined this when I posted the first chapter. You have no idea how full my heart is, how warm it makes me feel when I know people have read my work and laughed over it and cried over it. It's more than I ever could have asked for. So thank you, each and every one of you reading this.

Second, if you'd like, whether you've been reading along silently or commenting the whole way, leave me one last comment here. Tell me what you thought, your favorite moment, your least favorite, a part that made you feel something. I can't put into words how much it would mean to me.

Also, some answers to a few questions I've gotten: 1) I am perfectly ok with fanart! If you make it, id love to see it! Shoot me a discord message! 2) That goes for most fan made stuff too, cosplays or recordings or whatever u might want to do, just give me credit please, and if you can, shoot me a message with what you're doing so I can appreciate it fully! 3) I cannot believe I've gotten this question (/pos) but yes, if you want to get a physical copy of this fic in book form, go for it :) send me a pic of that too. Ill die. I have no idea how to go about that, so don't ask me, but wow. It would be an honor to sit on your shelves.

It is now time to subtly (read: not so subtly) plug my next fic :) “It's Called: Freefall” is already out with two chapters! It's an SBI foster fic with a kind of twist on the premise. It's quite a shift from Visage, but I'm super excited about it! So if you want more from me, that's where you'll find me next!

Wow, it's really over, huh? I have nothing left to say. It's been a wild ride. Thank you all for being here with me. No matter what, life goes on. Know that you are loved.

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